
IN SHEEP'S CLOTHING


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A Novel.

BY

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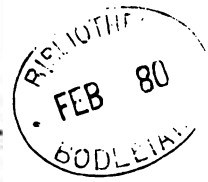
IN THREE VOLUMES.
VOL. I.



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IN SHEEP'S CLOTHING.

CHAPTER I.

And Irion sat at her bedroom window staring, as she had often stared, at the old grey castellated building away on the hill-top.

In her happy moods its dreamy poetic loneliness fascinated her; in her troubled moments its desolation frightened her—because of the ghosts which were said to wander there by night.

To-day she was simply speculative. Where was the owner of those miles of tree-covered hill, the should-be master of that almost ruined house? Was he alive or dead, that man-rejected alien, who had been driven with whips and scorns away from his people

and from his country? Even thinking of him made Irion feel cold and frightened. A man, the son of a good old English gentleman, the last of a proud old English family, a man whom the world had called great because of the talents which he possessed, and because of the rich promise of his youth. Such a man, and—a murderer!

He had not been hanged—not sentenced even; 'a quibble of the law and family interest had saved him,' the people said. But not one man, not one woman in all the county held him guiltless. Therefore they had driven him out from amongst them, curse pursued.

Irion had seen him once—she was quite a child then—seen him as he passed her in the street of Rockford, coming out of the justice-court, committed for trial—condemned already by his once friends! The first stones cast at him, as usual, by those who had fawned upon him prosperous. He had passed by her in the street, and had laid his hand upon her head, saying to the man with him: 'What a very pretty child,' and looking straight into

Irion's baby eyes. She was only five years old then, but she could remember having started away from his touch, and raced like a hunted animal across the road to the other side of the way, where some village boys and girls shouted to her that he had left blood-stains on her hair. She had never forgotten it. To-day, twenty years afterwards, she could recall—a boy's face, hairless still, but stern, and hard, and evil, so she had thought it, trembling under the fear which his touch had brought upon her.

And this was all she had known of Ulric Aylmer, except—that he was a murderer!

A boy of twenty years, and a slayer of human life! The horror of it had fallen upon her then with unnatural intensity, and it had never left her. When as a child she dreamed bad dreams, they were always of this blood-stained man (for to a child of five, twenty is manhood) clutching at her throat, and holding a knife over her. Even now in her womanhood, she dreamed the same dream sometimes, after she had sat staring at the old grey

towers, speculating as to the present of Ulric Aylmer—if he were yet alive.

It was the most striking object before Irion's bedroom window, this house, and the park, and the woods. A grand old family estate, let to the ghosts inside, and to the rooks and the owls outside. Irion intended to write a romance about it some day, when she should have learnt the fate of the owner. Some day she would tell the world that story which Rockford alone knew in detail. The story of the last of the Aylmers, who loved a village girl and in cold blood slew the man who stood in his way; the village swain who would have been so true to his lass, only he was laid low by 'the squire's son.'

Every one in Rockford knew the truth, —but the law, they said, blinded its own eyes, and stopped its own ears, and refused to hear the voice of the people crying out for justice. They were poor, all of them, and ignorant; but the Aylmers were rich, and wise in their generation. In London, who knew Jim Hobb, the gamekeeper's son, or his village lass? who cared that he was mur-

dered? He would leave no blank amongst them. In London, who did *not* know the Aylmers of Aylmer? Who would not have felt ashamed that a murderer should have lived and moved amongst them? The voice of respectability is loud to convince, the arm of prosperity is strong to compel—and so Ulric Aylmer was set free.

But the people of Rockford knew more, a great deal more, and they said amongst them that 'If ever a blackguard and a devil in man's clothing were walking the earth, unpunished, it was Ulric Aylmer.' And this, Irion also had told herself, shuddering always at the remembrance of him.

Nevertheless, the deserted house, and the gloomy woods, with the cloud-shadows floating over them; smiling sometimes, frowning sometimes, but ever changing, ever suggesting, had a charm for Irion which was all their own.

Her life was somewhat lonely, somewhat eventless, passing away with a monotonous, meaningless cadence, echoed only by the hills of sleepy Devon.

Now and again, indeed, stray sun-rays had

come and warmed it into a new life. These had taught the girl that there is something beyond charity schools and crops, somewhere out in the world, and that it was possible she might have a share in this something. Once before she had tasted of life, and again to-morrow she should revive the sweetness. Once she had been to London! to-morrow she was going again. Going on a visit for all the spring months. Going to friends whose world was so different from her world, whose life so apart from her life, that they might have been another form of creation altogether, instead of men and women such as she had been taught to understand manhood and womanhood in her country ignorance of worth.

These friends had a house in London, and a house near London, and a house by the sea. Shooting-boxes, moors, and salmon rivers. Servants everywhere, carriages everywhere—and money!—money like dust floating about them and covering them from head to foot. One of the daughters had been at school with Irion, and Irion had saved her from a great

punishment once. Afterwards, when this girl — Naomi Hurst — left school, she had shown her gratitude by having her country friend to stay with them, showing her a little of London life, and 'expanding her ideas' as they called it, 'making her discontented with a wholesome country life,' Colonel and Mrs. Floyd said, objecting to Irion's London sojourn. But Irion did not heed their objections. She accepted the invitation, and told them she was going, and went; paying her own expenses out of her own small sum of yearly dress-money.

Irion was poor, had always been poor, and was not a little proud of her poverty—a failing this of good old county families.—They would set themselves as far as possible from city contamination you see; making a virtue of necessity. Irion's father was a Floyd, one of the 'Floyds of Rockford.' A minor branch, perhaps, a younger son of a younger son, portionless, landless, substanceless—but a Floyd! What more could society ask of him or require? Integrity, honesty, honour? They were matters of course. What Floyd

had ever disgraced his name?—to his own thinking, there being no disgrace in nonentity, no shame in imitating the cattle within your gates, grazing on the grass of your field, and being content not to long for the fruit which some fool has told you is in your neighbour's garden. 'Why should we strain our necks, and fret ourselves to look over the hedge and see whether there be anything worth having on the other side? We are certain there is not. Nothing but grass grows within our own fences, and what is not given to us, it is not possible that other men should possess,' they say, self-satisfied, these Floyds of Rockford. And so they sleep on—content.

Such were Irion's parents, such also was her brother, the curate of Rockford Old Church, whose calling was to stand on the defensive against all modern church innovations. To preach that there was no such thing as a new light in which to see old doctrines. Such, too, was her sister Eleanor, a good woman of the old self-denying school, wherein duty stood first, and pleasure in the back-ground. She held the welfare of the

parish in her hands, and was a worthy shepherd of her flock.

But Irion was different. She had longings and ambitions, and dreams of greatness—if not for herself for some one who should fill her life to the exclusion of herself. Some visionary husband or son, perhaps, or if these were denied her, some woman friend, who, struggling to grasp fame might call upon Irion for help, and who, reaching it at last, would turn to her and say: 'By your aid I am what I am.'

Irion would have dreamt of fame for herself, only that it seemed a thing too impossible of attainment. There were so few ways in which a woman could be great without losing some of the most beautiful parts of her womanhood—her dependence, and her softness. It were a greater pride, Irion thought, to stand by a husband's side, helping him, as only a woman can, towards the accomplishment of his greatness. But if this were not possible to her, she might be great herself perhaps—some day—in exchange for her youth and her profitless beauty.

For the present this youth and this beauty were all sufficient, since they might lead her to greater things. Already they had carried her up to London once, and out into the London world, and amongst the London crowd, who had deigned to notice her because of them; not because she was a Floyd, which was her pass-word in Devon.

And now again she was going to be one of the revellers of the great city. An onlooker at the vastness of human desires, a wonderer at our mighty capacity for enjoyment; for progressing, for *living*, not *existing* as she was doing—she and her friends at Rockford.

'To-morrow!—to-morrow evening, and I shall be in London again,' she told herself, still staring out over the hills of Aylmer.

And so the sun set.

CHAPTER II.

AND just before dinner-time Irion arrived in Park Place.

Naomi Hurst had met her at Paddington, and driven her home in a dashing little pony carriage all her own. And nothing had gone amiss in the day's journey. The Hursts were all very glad to see her, so they said, with necessary politeness. But they were not a demonstrative family, having had too much of the good things of life to rejoice over any. There was nothing *new* in a visitor, nothing to be excited about. If for Irion it was an event to visit London, it was none for the Hursts to have her there, so many visitors a-year being as necessary a part of their 'season' as their dresses and their horses. Irion Floyd was of rather less

account than some, she being only 'Naomi's friend,' and Naomi being only a younger sister. Let Naomi rejoice over her if she would, and let Naomi take the burden of amusing her. Which Naomi accordingly did, in her own lazy fashion.

So on arrival it was Naomi who took Irion up to her bed-room, where for a moment the country girl felt overpowered by the magnificence of her surroundings. But it was only for a moment; they were not new to her this time, and in five minutes she was 'at home.' How different this to her last visit! Last year she had taken a month to get over the feeling, that like a frightened cat she should presently do some mischief amongst the glass and the china, with which her tables were covered, or put to unholy uses some sacred toy, of which she did not know the value. Such fears did not revive to-day; it was her second visit to Park Place. And habit had become to her that second nature which profits us so much better than the first.

Whilst she dressed for dinner, Naomi sat by the table and talked to her, telling her all

the 'news.' How many invitations to balls were 'on hand,' how many were sent out by themselves, how many 'girls' of last season had 'picked up' husbands; how many were 'disappointed.' What new actors were 'making a sensation,' what new singers 'setting the Thames on fire;' and last and longest, clearest in detail, and most interesting in kind—what new styles of dress were 'coming in,' or 'worn!'

It was all very amusing to Irion, fresh from the country. In a month it would be as worn out for her as for Naomi Hurst. Only so many necessary phases of existence in June—things no more to be avoided than the east winds through the sunshine, or the London blacks, or its fogs, or any other of its natural evils. Naomi did not like 'the season;' she did not like anything, but she went through with it as a duty by no means to be laid aside. Irion delighted in it all—even the fog. It was so new to her, and so exciting; so full of beauty and colour, and movement. All that the young life yearns after—if it be denied it—drooping and dying

for lack of it. It was endless amusement to Irion, only to mark what these people said and did for the filling up of their life's gilded cup, which somehow always seemed to Irion empty for all their struggling.

After Naomi had told her of the important business of life, speaking always in a monotonous tone, as if she were half asleep, she turned off to the unimportant comings and goings of other people; outsiders, whose interests were in no wise one with her own—mere afterthoughts these—useful enough to supply half-an-hour's interesting conversation whilst waiting for the arrival of the next new dress, or a pause before dinner—as now.

'By-the-bye,' she said, lazily tossing her arms over her head, and throwing herself far back in her chair; 'you don't know that Gilbert is coming home next week? He is though,' with expression and attitude quite unchanged, although 'Gilbert' had been absent from his home for five years.

'As I never saw your brother, I naturally don't take any great amount of interest in him,' Irion answered; 'more especially after

hearing you all talk about him last year.' Then laughing; 'You don't seem *very much* excited about his coming yourself.' She was pinning a white camellia in her dress, and talked merely for talking sake.

'Oh! yes I am. Gilbert is a good enough sort of fellow, or was when he went away. Australia may have spoiled him. I shouldn't be a bit surprised at any change. Young men are so absolutely the creatures of circumstance.'

'And young women are not of course,' Irion answered, laughing.

'Well, you see our circumstances don't change. Some of us are poor, and some rich. But that doesn't make much difference. We are all taught alike, and dressed alike, and married alike—with the slight difference of cost. And if any of us try to do something new we are instantly sat upon. So you see we've no chance of being anything but respectable. Men are different,' she added, with the philosophy of resignation to an inevitable, which modern training teaches us.

Naomi was not a pretty girl proper, but

she was decidedly fascinating, well shapen, well posed, well dressed, with that lazy listlessness of bearing, which is so attractive to the old young man of to-day. She was never moved about anything, except in private, the success or failure of a new costume. But as only her maid and her sisters were witness to these signs of human weakness, Naomi was not ashamed.

How different Irion, standing side by side with her! Irion, filled with dreams, and longings, and young ambitions. Restless because of the incompleteness of her life. Always striving for something beyond. Always hoping for some destiny higher than was hers in the present. Irion, with her bright health-glowing beauty, which startled Londoners by its brilliancy, and its country purity.

Irion was older than Naomi, five years older; but she looked ten years younger because of the natural life she had led. Naomi at twenty was a woman; Irion at twenty-five was a girl in all the freshness of her girlhood. We are not what our years make us, but what our spirits, and our hearts, and our thoughts give us of age.

'And your brother,' Irion said, growing curious now about this only member of the family whom she had not seen, but whom she was about to see, according to Naomi. 'Is he coming home for ever and a day, or is he only visiting England?'

'Six months I suppose, or as much more as he can get out of the good nature of his employers. Gilbert lives on the indulgence of his fellow-creatures.'

'Is he a successful man in—Melbourne, is it?'

'Melbourne, yes. Successful enough in a way. He's editor, or something of the kind, of one of the great Melbourne newspapers. Head man he calls himself, and like most "heads," he does as little work as possible, being content with the pay, and taking a praiseworthy pleasure in seeing other people work. It's so satisfactory to admire the intellect of our inferiors, you see—gives one such a good opinion of the race.'

'I prefer having a good opinion of myself,' Irion answered, amused; 'I find so much satisfaction in admiring my own work.

Selfish, I grant you, but the only inducement to accomplish anything, it seems to me.'

'Accomplish! what are you going to accomplish? Imaginative little enthusiast! you may accomplish getting married, perhaps, if you have intellect enough. Not that I see the use of that when it is done.'

'It depends upon the kind of the doing. It may be the highest or the lowest of human destiny, according to its result,' putting a finishing touch to her hair, and looking at herself in the glass with evident content.

'You don't mean to say you really want to get married, *really?*' Naomi asked with a spark of life, sitting up in her chair, and staring into Irion's eyes.

'I *do* though,' unhesitatingly.

'Why, what's the use? If your lines have been cast in decent places you are not likely to improve upon them. Ten to one but you get them into a horrible tangle—and then think of the trouble of putting it right again. No, my dear; like Hamlet, "I'd rather bear those ills we have, than fly to others that we

know not of." He was a wise young man, Hamlet, you know—there's the dinner-bell.'

Irion looked pleased and hungry as the clanging fell upon her ear. She was half way down the first flight of stairs before Naomi had traversed the length of the passage leading from the bedroom door. Eating, like everything else with her, was scarcely worth the trouble it entailed. Only, alas, the hardness of fate! if you don't eat you can't dress, and if dress were not, then indeed there would be nothing of worth and beauty in this great empty world. Therefore, Naomi ate as a part of her daily duty, and Irion ate as one of her daily pleasures. And for both of them their destiny was unaccomplished.

There was no company to-night at the Hursts' table. They were all going out instead. Some to the opera, others to a ball, later, towards midnight, perhaps; if they could muster energy enough for the undertaking (it was only at Mrs. P. Brown's), after an extra glass of wine at dinner, and forty winks in an arm-chair. But every-

thing in life depends upon inclination, and they could not have told you at nine o'clock whether they were going to this despised ball or not. What did it matter?

Irion was of the opera party.

So to-night, only the family were at the dinner table — except Irion, whom they did not look upon as a stranger now. At either end, Mr. and Mrs. Hurst, inoffensive old people enough, as their children showed society by a generous condescension towards their weaknesses. Good for the ordinary purposes of money-getting, and money-giving, and comfort-providing, but rather in the way outside their sphere. Between them sat Ormond Hurst, Esquire, barrister-at-law, and M.P. for the very Conservative and very respectable borough of Great Bribesend. He was commander-in-chief of—well, the united forces of the world, if ranked according to his own estimation! but commander of his devoted family as granted him by common consent. Next to him Mrs. Betrix, the Miss Hurst of other days, married, widowed and returned, as the

proverbial halfpenny, upon the hands of her parents. Agatha Betrix! a great beauty once, somewhat faded to-day, but by no means gone; 'the handsome widow' people called her still, and thanks to 'toilet necessities,' she deserved the title. Opposite was Miss Hurst of to-day, the only one amongst them who respected her old parents—apart from what was to be 'got out of them.' But Miss Hurst ignored society, wrote scientific articles for magazines, and found time between the issues for a little filial attentiveness. Naomi sat by her side; and last and least, at a corner, 'Baby,' as she was called; a schoolgirl, and a nobody for the next three years.

Conversation at dinner varied with the talkers. It was not brilliant. What is the use of brilliancy for family benefit? One must nurse one's talents for an appreciative audience. One is never a prophet in one's own country. All this the Hursts knew, and knowing they put theory into unblushing practice. Not that they were fools, or doubtful of their own worth, especially Ormond;

but what would it profit him to show his wisdom to his family? If they didn't know it intuitively, they ought. It was in no wise worth his while to prove himself for their enlightenment.

About the middle of dinner somebody mentioned Gilbert's coming home — as a matter quite by-the-bye—and treated as such by them all. Irion, interested, asked which day he would arrive in England, and where. But this was far beyond the reach of their curiosity. One suggested Monday next, another Tuesday, a third the end of the week. Irion remarked that it would be easily found out by inquiring at the shipping office in the city on what day the *Colonial* was expected to come in. Old Mr. Hurst merely answered her, with paternal affability, nodding and smiling at Irion:

'Quite right, my dear; very sensible remark on your part. You always do 'it the right nail on the 'ead; I wish we could say as much for everybody in these days. It's the fashion to go knocking about 'ere and there and everywhere—never mind where!

You'll 'it the right spot presently, if you go on long enough; or if you don't somebody else will for you and save you the trouble.' Then he laughed at his own joke, and Mrs. Hurst laughed because he laughed, whilst all the rest looked as if a great sin had been committed, of which it was their part to be ashamed.

And Gilbert was forgotten.

But Irion felt no surprise over their undemonstrativeness. She had seen it all before on a thousand greater and lesser occasions. Gilbert was not a new dress, or a new novel, or a new acquaintance of high degree. Therefore he was not a part of their life. He was not June, and he was not 'the season.'

CHAPTER III.

BUT the following morning there was just a perceptible degree of—not excitement—curiosity rather, about the return of Gilbert Hurst. After all there would be *novelty* in it, and *novelty* is the god of these days.

They were all at breakfast, and Mrs. Hurst was reading them her letter. A custom of hers, and generally unheeded. What could there be in the correspondence of an old woman to interest or amuse the young? Only to-day they were disposed to be gracious and lend an ear. The first words of the letter aroused their curiosity.

'DEAR MOTHER (Mrs. Hurst read),

'Just a line to prepare your weak mind for an electric shock. Lewis is coming

home with me! You know Lewis—the fellow I have written so much about. The mad man—awful swell though, I warn you. Will think you all emblems of pitiable ignorance. He's bringing over his two-year old child with him—wants to have it brought out in London. Tragedy, of course—but elevated. His countrymen can't come it at any price. Prepare one of the attics for him. Turn out all the furniture, bed included. Lewis hates furniture, and despises a bed as tending to effeminacy. Goes in for Space, you know, and Causes, and Necessities. Queer fellow, but sound. Oh! and he has a dog. Don't neglect the dog; if you do, Lewis will just walk out of the house with less ceremony than he walked into it, and that won't be over much, I doubt.

'Tell Naomi she needn't waste her energies on a new rig-out for the occasion. Lewis never looks at women. They're not dogs you see; if they were they might have a chance. But he's a right down good fellow when you have learnt to read him—kind of

living allegory you know—means something quite different from what he says. Don't think he's over addicted to me, but he tolerates me when I don't interfere with his "ways," as he calls them. As for my opinion of him, you know it already. He's just the only fellow for whom I have cared a brass farthing since I left Harrow, and if you, mother mine, are glad to see me, you will be glad to see him too, as the man who saved my life, and is my one friend in this beastly hole Melbourne. I have prepared you for a well-meaning aborigine. And don't forget about the empty attic, or dog's-meat. We shall follow this letter in a day or two. Love to all the girls,

'Yours, dear mother,

'GILBERT.'

'I like new people,' Naomi remarked sleepily, 'they're amusing for a day or two—till one knows them.'

'Civilised people — yes,' Mrs. Betrix answered; 'but one doesn't care for wild beast shows in these days; they were very

well when one could get no more refined excitement. I do think Gilbert need not have gone out of his way to introduce his colonial scribblers to us—uninvited. What say you, Ormond?'

'Amuses him, and don't hurt me,' was the reply.

Paté de fois gras, versus Caviare on toast, was a much more important question just then; more personally affecting the speaker. Mrs. Betrix saw that there was no 'strong' feeling about the matter on her brother's part, whatever there might be on her own. She was of the wise ones of her generation, who nurse their words for favourable opportunities, knowing when to be silent. Therefore she reserved her further opinion about Gilbert's 'colonial scribbler,' till she should be asked it as a gift. That would come soon enough. 'Ormond always consulted her,' as she told herself proudly.

'And who may this Mr. Lewis be?' Irion asked, much more interested than the people concerned, in his coming.

'A semi-civilised Aborigine, as Gilbert says,'

Ormond Hurst answered her, 'one of *nature's* noblemen. A fellow who has run all to mind, to the utter ruination of his body: seedy ties, paper collars, coloured shirtsleeves, that kind of thing.'

'Or *sans* collar, *sans* shirts, *sans* ties, *sans* everything — but paint,' Irion suggested, laughing.

'Most likely that,' Naomi said; 'what can you expect of a *native?* All I hope is, that he'll have some originality to compensate for his presence. I like amusing people,' she added, sleepily, raising her eyes from her plate, as if even caviare failed to supply a certain deficiency in life generally.

'Do you? I *hate* them,' Irion said, warmly, 'they're always so tiresome. They might be charming if they would only be amusing when one wanted them to; but to be amused *nolens volens*, to be drowned with amusement is worse than none at all.'

'That's a very sensible remark of Irion's,' said Mr. Hurst, finding himself replete with the substantial good of life, and putting his plate aside with the benignity of a mind (and

a body) at ease. 'Very sensible indeed, my dear—amusing people are the greatest bores of society. Spoil every dinner, from the City downwards, they do. I do 'ate being amused over turtle soup.'

Then Mr. Hurst left the table, and prepared to go off to the City (he bore the broad title of an Australian merchant amongst his acquaintance). His carriage and pair had waited an hour for him at the door, but then it is the bounden duty of a carriage and pair belonging to that august personage, a City prince, to wait. The family looked relieved at his departure. He was always a sort of reproach to them—another necessary evil. Happily for them his city occupations prevented his appearing in 'good' society with them. He hated all that 'nonsensical bosh,' and left the family to their enjoyment of it under the protection of his eldest son, whom he had made worthy to go hand in hand with the nobles of the country. His absolute faith in this son, a firm belief in his infallibility, were the religion of Hurst senior's old age.

And Ormond Hurst had never disgraced him.

After breakfast Mrs. Hurst went to her boudoir. She was a quiet, inoffensive old lady, possessed of much tact, and a certain womanly quickness, which had made her fall into the ways of her children's society with considerable ease and grace. Pleasant to look upon, with a pleasant voice, and dressed to perfection, the young people had 'no objection' to their mother's chaperonage.

These 'young people' having finished their breakfast—somewhere about midday—went to the morning room, as usual, to discuss the dresses for the coming evening, or the bonnets for the Park, or the horse which should be 'shown' to-day in the Row.

To Irion all this meant work, real hard work; to the others only idle talk. Irion had but two ball dresses in the place of their twenty; and these two, by dint of persuasion or force, must be made to answer every occasion—and answer it well too. For Irion had no idea of appearing as the proverbial poor relation amongst them. But clever

fingers and a true artist's eye did greater things for her little, than milliners and maids for their much. Naomi always envied Irion her power of 'looking well' in every place and time, 'without any trouble,' Naomi said, but it was not so.

Irion was always taking trouble; educating her eye and hand, exercising her imagination, and her ingenuity. She watched the flowers and the butterflies, and saw how they were dressed; what colours lay side by side, and how nature had merged them cunningly, and Irion said: 'Why should not art go and do likewise?' She plucked the grasses and the leaves, and twined them into beautiful forms, and learnt from these wherein grace lay. It was work this, but pleasant work and profitable, since she could go to London, and in her poverty stand side by side with the millionaires; proud that passers-by turned to look at *her*—not at them. What they wore was nothing new. It had been seen in Paris, if not before in London—it, or others of its kind. But what Irion wore was always individual, it had always something of herself,

and her own imaginative nature written upon it; something suggestive and fancy-taking. Naomi would have given her fine clothes, or lent her anything, or ordered her anything from Worth's, or from White's, or from where she would—for Naomi was indolently generous—but Irion had no desire to follow in the footsteps of her richer neighbours. She found a greater delight, selfish again she would have said, in her own work.

So she planned, and sewed, and talked, whilst the other two, Mrs. Betrix and Naomi, lay back wearily on sofa and arm-chair. It 'amused' them to listen to her. She told such quaint tales of innocent country folk who believed in everything, especially themselves. Of young girls and young men who dreamed of love in a cottage still. Love in 1879! 'It was as good as reading a novel, or seeing a play,' they said, 'to sit and listen to Irion Floyd, and to see her working like a convict all the while, and looking so fresh and so charming, as if it were twelve p.m. instead of twelve a.m.' A novelty this girl, and as a novelty—delightful.

'By-the-by,' said Naomi, presently rousing from a dream, 'is your novel begun yet, Irion?'

'No; didn't I tell you that I must know the fate of my fiend before venturing to slay him in effigy?'

'Has he never come to light?'

'Never, nor ever will I suppose now—happily for society. People say he is still in the land of the living though.'

'I have not the least doubt that he *is* living and thriving in some business more profitable than romantic; stock exchange, or bill discounting, or alderman, or the next lord mayor perhaps! What does an infantine murder or two matter? Change your name, make a lucky speculation, set up at Lancaster Gate with a wife and family. Who will ask any questions?'

'Wife!' Irion interrupted, speaking scornfully. 'Wife! where is a wife to come from? Who would be found in all the world to marry Ulric Aylmer? Marry a murderer! What woman would sell her soul to blood for the riches of a thousand cities, if might be? Any

other crime I could imagine forgiven for love —*any other*. But blood! human blood! cold, heartless, passionless murder! No, Naomi. *No!* Ulric Aylmer will never get a wife, let all else prosper with him!'

'Excitable creature you are, Irion,' put in Mrs. Betrix, from her sofa. 'Of course he isn't going to volunteer the information that he is a murderer. The law acquitted him, do you see? What more substantial proof of his innocence?'

'Come down to Rockford,' Irion said, indignant now, 'and ask them there. Stop at every cottager's door, at every squire's house, and ask whether Ulric Aylmer were guilty or innocent. There would be no difference of opinion, we all *know* him guilty.'

'By report, say by report, my dear, allow for twenty years of strengthening for the prejudice,' Naomi drawled, in an aside. But Irion did not heed her. She was riding her favourite little hobby-horse at a gallop, and nothing would stop it, so she went on:

'If all that came out after the trial had been known during it, even the law would

have been forced for very shame, to turn a deaf ear to *family interest.* Somehow things were *not* known till too late. But our people *felt* for all that. The outrage was against them. It was one of themselves who had been murdered. They never forgave, nor ever will. We country people don't forget so easily. They cursed his very name, and the curse remains to-day. Why, he would never dare to ask a woman to marry him, lest some day, some Rockford inhabitant should come across their path and tell her his story.'

'Inconsequent child! does anybody remember any story for twenty years? except Jack the Giant Killer, perhaps. Who now, in a round-bellied, capon-lined, suppose we say *Justice!* to be correct, would recognise a beardless boy of nineteen years?'

'I believe I should,' quickly. 'Not his features perhaps, but something would tell me. I should have an involuntary shudder at his presence, and turn cold as—as the spiritualists are said to do in the presence of an unseen spirit.'

She was laughing again now, partly at her

own earnestness over this old childish horror of hers, partly at the vacant and sleepy expression of Naomi Hurst's face. After all she was a fool, as she often told herself, to have any party feeling at all in this old affair. What was Ulric Aylmer to her, or hers, or any one amongst them in these days? Had he not been one of the Rockford 'families' he had been forgotten long ago. Unfortunately he was a part of the soil, and a very undesirable part. They had been able to cast him from them; but there stood his house, and his estate, and the village of Aylmer, all his own. And these things kept him alive in their memory. He was not dead they knew, or concluded, since the property was still unclaimed. No new hand had clutched it by right of purchase or succession. Moreover, the tenant's rents were collected regularly by a London lawyer, who came down to Aylmer for the purpose. He sent the money somewhere, no one knew where, but they concluded that 'the last of the Aylmers' was still amongst the living.

'Go on with your story,' said Naomi, just

lifting her eyelids for a moment. 'It's amusing. What became of the village maiden, the "If you're waking call me early" part of the story? Tell you what, Irion, if you'll write a novel, I'll write a poem—needn't take so long you see—one might have a chance of finishing a poem. As to novels, can't think how anybody ever wrote one. I have begun three—never got out of the first volume—gave it up. Poetry's much simpler; four or five verses will do, and one can copy "Locksley Hall" quite easily, or "The Corsair;" or one can make a judicious mixture of the two. But go on about Bluebell—or Violet—or May—or whatever her *sweet* name might have been. Dear innocent laird-loved, laird-rejected, village maiden, in clump shoes, and crinoline! Wasn't crinoline the fashion in those days?' opening her large grey eyes, and fixing them vacantly on Irion. All romancing was over now. Irion made a bound behind Naomi's chair, caught hold of it, and roughly tipped it backwards and forwards.

'Do you suppose,' she said, 'that I am going to talk whilst you mumble yourself off to sleep in that idiotic manner? You don't care one threepenny piece what became of that poor girl—Betty her name was—*Betty Smith!* Won't even that serve to wake you up, as standing in the stead of your Lily, or your Snowdrop? Well, Betty—poor Betty made herself scarce before the trial—disappeared you know—didn't want to be questioned. People say that if Betty could have been found things would have gone differently; Ulric Aylmer would never have got off. Betty was our "eye-witness," but she was true to her colours, and wouldn't *peach*, to talk her own language.'

'Betty knew a thing or two,' said Mrs. Betrix, winking from the sofa.

'Seriously though,' Irion continued. 'Poor Betty was the most to be pitied after all.'

'Of course, Betty killed herself,' Naomi drawled. 'It's quite the right thing to do.'

'Yes, she did,' Irion answered, seriously. 'Poor girl! a very few months afterwards her parents heard of her death by her own

hand. They were broken-hearted. They have never recovered it. Poor old souls! That's another curse on Ulric Aylmer's head!' angrily.

'You country people are not sparing of your condemnation,' Naomi said. 'Some of us would be sorry to stand up for judgment before you, I fancy—I for one.'

'You! You are neither a murderer, or—or—or—a——'

'Or Ulric Aylmer—that's quite enough; we'll take him for a type of all uncleanness. There's nothing like generalising. It saves trouble.'

'Then I would take good for my type. It would be a truer one than evil. There are more good men in the world than sinners, let morality preach what it will; more beauty than ugliness, more happiness than misery.'

'And more neutrality than either—happily for mankind.'

'I don't agree with you. Neutrality is given to a few who court it as the greatest good. Yes. But *happiness* is the natural state of mankind if they would have it so.

So many of us though, overlooking all the beautiful, and peaceful, and bright hours of our life, take account only of the misery which has fallen to our lot. No doubt it *is* more prominent, but the other is wider spreading, and of longer duration. Only just because happiness is an every-day occurrence, we have grown used to it, and don't appreciate it as we ought. We——'

Irion looked up from her work, and saw that both Mrs. Betrix and Naomi were asleep. She turned to the clock—twelve in the day! Well, they had exchanged it for twelve last night, and they would repeat the bargain to-night, and every night for three months! True enough, Irion was following their example, but her strength was young yet, and strong. She could give up her nights and her mornings too to the enjoyment of rapid life, nor feel the want of rest after what to her was as yet no toil. But she knew that such a state would not be for ever. Excitement was given to growing old before its time, wearing itself out in the struggle to exist. She had never once

wished to exchange her sun-warmed country life for Naomi Hurst's gas-lit nights and days. For all that, the gas glowed brightly even in comparison with the sun, and its glamour stirred Irion's nerves with a new delicious life, and London was for her a place filled with wonders, and with delights inconceivable.

Irion was young yet, and very beautiful.

CHAPTER IV.

So the days passed on, alike in form, different only in colour, and that but in small degree. Everyone copied the pattern of everyone else's dress. Everyone eat and drank after the receipt of the other. There is more faith in the religion of society than the poor preachers have been able to teach, for all the greatness of their endeavours. There is more energy in the cause of social righteousness than any shown for spiritual salvation, let its pastors cry as they will for help. It is a faithless and perverse generation, growing fat upon the axioms 'Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die,' and 'sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.' A comfortable religion this, and trouble-sparing, and we embrace it readily. We have teachers

enough and churches enough—our wealth and our indolence and the gilded temples of our idolatry. And we have worshippers enough—our wives, and our mothers, and our sisters! Society has become our law-giver and our tyrant. We bow down before it, licking the dust at its feet; craven slaves, and the bondsmen of slaves. And this is happiness!

Irion sometimes tried to argue upon these things when the meaninglessness of it all would come upon her, waking in the night. What was the prize which they would win—these strugglers in a race without a goal? They were weary, they were footsore, and yet they would not rest. By-and-bye, when they should have worn out muscle, and tissue, and vital power, they would fall down dead. And that would be the end! Was there much satisfaction in the prospect, she wondered, much to make the struggle worthy? It might be so for them; for herself there was another meaning to the words life and destiny. But what irked her was, she could not interpret it.

Great was her desire for something absolute, but greater was the vagueness in which this something clothed herself.

'There must be work for women to do,' she said; 'great work, worthy work, work which would honour them in the doing.'

But how and where, amidst so much imperfection? Irion could not yet answer herself. Only she *felt* that worth, and greatness, and human progress could not be mere tales told by an idiot, high sounding, and meaningless.

Perhaps it was only *men* who might accomplish a world's greatness.

'If it be so,' she said, 'cannot we women help them to the fulfilling of their desires, and will not our reward be tenfold? Who shall deny our power when we hold the destinies of our children in our hands? Who shall call us helpless when we can make or mar a human race?'

And with this one tangible idea of a 'mission,' Irion would fall asleep again; not content, but only secure in her young faith that something was good in this world,

something true, something worthy of God's immortality.

Irion had a belief in human worth, in the goodness of men and women as God made them. Her religion was the world's loveliness, and the perfectness of nature's working. She was happy in her strong young faith.

So time flew quickly for her, and the week passed, and one morning, when nobody was thinking of strangers within their gates, Gilbert Hurst arrived at what was home five years ago. He had his baggage with him, and his friend, and he was rejoicing loudly. The door was opened to him, and he walked in as if he had walked out yesterday. No one came forward to welcome him. It is not fashionable to 'welcome' your friends. Country people may afford to do so, perhaps—but in London! are there not the maid-servants and the man-servants to giggle at your 'effervescence' and to joke with the cook down stairs about your 'gush.'

But Gilbert had always been 'a disgrace to the family;' there was no 'quieting' him. So

soon as the door was opened, he strode off upstairs, three at a time, to the drawing-room; entered it with a burst, and, finding no one there, exit with a bang. Then up another flight of stairs into the morning-room. A shout, and a kiss all round, and a sudden draw up just as he was about to include Irion in his family greeting. Already he had caught her by the shoulders, and turned her roughly round, her back being towards him, when Mrs. Betrix, doing propriety, entered into an introduction.

'Miss Floyd, my brother Gilbert.'

'Very sorry, I'm sure,' releasing her; 'hope Miss Floyd will forgive me; thought it was Mab grown up.'

Irion laughed good-naturedly, and he addressing Naomi, continued still in a state of 'unnecessary excitement,' as Mrs. Betrix afterwards remarked.

'Where's the Mater? Governor's at office, of course. Haven't quite forgotten the old home ways yet, you see. Naomi, you're looking as jolly as a three-year-old. Wake up, old girl,' and giving her another kiss, Gilbert

made a frantic dash upstairs to his mother's bedroom.

'Rougher than ever!' Naomi remarked, but not ill-temperedly, setting her collar in order.

'What did I say about colonial associates for a man of his class?' added Mrs. Betrix, spitefully; self-satisfied at the result of her prophesies.

Irion made no remark, she thought her own thoughts silently.

They had not time to lavish any further sisterly praise on Gilbert and his 'ways.' A new event interrupted them. Standing at the open door was a stranger: Mr. Lewis, of course. He spoke to them, addressing the room generally.

'Hurst told me to follow him, so I followed him. He seems to have evaporated. Which way did he go, do you know?'

'Mr. Lewis, I conclude,' Mrs. Betrix answered, leaving her sofa, and introducing herself and her sister. She was never forgetful of the formalities of society. She asked him to come in, and showed him a chair, with proper ceremony. He came in and sat down, and

led in with him a huge dog, of a species unknown to any of the girls. A noble and benign-looking creature which Irion felt a great wish to hug. No doubt she would have done so, had she been alone.

'If you object to the dog,' Lewis remarked, seeing all eyes upon it, 'he will wait for me outside the door.'

But there was no apology for its presence, no offer to dispense with it altogether. Luckily it was not the fashion for girls to be timid this season. They both assured him that the dog was quite welcome to his place by his master's side. He did not thank them for their condescension, but made a remark about the weather; which he satirised by the expression of his face, and the tone of his voice. He said it with such evident mockery of its emptiness.

Presently, when he was answering Mrs. Betrix's questions, laconically, and with no spark of interest in her evidently forced conversation, Irion, thinking he was not looking, laid her hand upon the dog's head, and bending, kissed it silently. But he saw her. An

expression of almost womanly softness came over his face, which before had been stern and unpleasing to look upon. Now, nothing could be more beautiful than the tenderness which played for a moment about his mouth and eyes, and then passed away. A question from Naomi Hurst dispelled it.

He did not encourage their attempts at conversation, and unless directly questioned, sat silent. It was not the silence of awkwardness, but of self-absorption. He was thought-engrossed—or tired. Irion could not quite tell which. It was not her part to entertain him, so she could watch him, and speculate about him, as she always liked to do about strangers, wondering as to the story of their lives as they passed from day to day.

He was not like any other man she had ever seen. Ill-dressed, as Ormond Hurst had said he would be, but not ill-mannered—save that he lacked that outward show of attentiveness which the men of our class have learned from, and for society. He was self-possessed, but also self-centred, seeming not

to heed what was said or done around him. A curious face, un-English, hard-set, determined, and about the mouth and forehead lines of a sensitiveness almost painful to look upon. He might have suffered overmuch, or worked overmuch, or rioted overmuch with his life, for there was a pained look of weariness in his face. But there was nothing weak about it. Only an overworn strength, an overtaxed force, a generally worn-out vitality. For age, he might have been forty, or he might have been fifty, Irion thought; there was nothing to mark his years in all his person. Broad-shouldered and muscular, he had yet hands small and colourless, with the same over-taxed sickly look upon them as on his face.

But of all things which struck Irion as strange in him, as setting him apart from any other man she had ever seen, his voice was the most strange. An intense voice, compelling, and withal heart-moving. She had never heard its like before. It was not the tone, it was not the expression, but its exceeding penetrating power, its low per-

sistent strength. Even in the first minutes of hearing him speak she was aware of the influence of his voice alone over her. She knew herself fascinated. She knew that this man had taken up a place in her imagination, apart from all others, even now before she had spoken to him. She felt an instant pity for, and sympathy with him; but how, or why, or on what grounds, she could not tell herself. She had never heard that he was of the world's bondsmen. On the contrary, Gilbert Hurst had described his friend, writing of him, as a man of substance, well-esteemed, well-favoured by the world; an independent man, living the life he had chosen for himself out of a thousand others which lay open before him. 'He's as rich as Crœsus,' Gilbert once wrote, 'but prefers living like a Pan, in pastoral simplicity, twiddling his life away upon a flute.' He did not look the character, Irion thought, now; there was very little *simplicity* about him.

'And how long are you going to stay in England?' Mrs. Betrix asked, for something

to say. It is so difficult to supply the whole conversation for one who is a perfect stranger to you, and to your operas, and to your theatres. A native of Australia too! 'an aborigine,' as she still called him for her own delight.

'As long or as short a time as it pleases me—probably short,' he answered, looking down at his dog.

'Why short, after such a tiresome journey?'

'I am not predisposed to like England. I only came over on business.'

'Oh, yes, Gilbert told us; you want to get a play published.'

'That, and other things.'

'Is it your first visit to England?'

'No, I was here once before, when I was quite young. I remember very little about it.'

'You have friends or acquaintance in London, I conclude? Where shall we find that corner of the earth which is not in intimate connection with London?'

'Your brother — yes,' Lewis answered, pulling the dog's ears impatiently.

'Gilbert! oh, Gilbert is, of course! I didn't mean him, he's nobody; other friends or acquaintance?'

'None. One friend is enough for any man, and acquaintances are an unmitigated evil—one of the few in which I have never rejoiced,' he added, with a low unmerry laugh.

Then there was another silence. Irion to break it, remarked:

'What a very handsome dog your's is!'

'You think so,' he answered, in a tone which implied 'You are talking at random about what you know nothing,' and she felt 'shut up,' as she told Naomi later. Happily, at that moment Gilbert stormed down upon them. Lewis looked relieved, and said, in a more natural voice than he had as yet spoken:

'Here you are! I thought you had discarded me utterly. Show me where I am to put up, there's a good fellow. Bimboo wants a biscuit; I must open my box for him.'

'All serene—follow me.'

'Yes, you said that before.'

'Gilbert told us to take all the furniture

out of your room,' Mrs. Betrix explained, 'and to put you up among the gods; so blame him for your discomfort.'

'He knows me,' Lewis answered, tersely.

But the same look of softness came over his face which had thanked Irion when she kissed the dog—a piece of foolishness on her part, of which she was now ashamed, having been caught in the act.

So they went away again—the new-comers —and the women dissected them after the manner of women. Not so much Gilbert—he was a brother, and utterly uninteresting—but Gilbert's friend. 'The wild beast,' as Mrs. Betrix named him, delighting in her own acuteness. 'The Aborigine,' according to Naomi, delighting in nothing. Mrs. Betrix had objected to the man before he came; was it likely she would alter her opinion because of having seen him? What is knowledge to prejudice? A poor follower bending the knee and bowing the head before a tyrant who has usurped its throne. Mrs. Betrix's faith was in what *should be*, not what *is*.

Again Irion said nothing. Any ordinary

man she would have discussed freely enough with them. This man had made her dumb. Again she was aware, almost painfully aware, of the strangeness of her feelings towards him; of his personality for her, his apartness from all other men who were strangers as he.

Is it not often so? Do we not often come upon someone, suddenly it may be, someone who seems to stand out in unnatural distinctness from the crowded canvas of our lives. Some one who in the first moment of seeing had for us a definable form, and colour, and influence, which was not in others of the crowd? And has it not come to pass that the form and the influence made to itself flesh and blood, and stepped out from amongst the lifeless figures on the canvas, and came down upon us, and laid a hand over our shoulders, startling us into a sudden consciousness of LIFE? Life as a reality, not a dream-life which has been made beautiful, maybe, or hideous, but absolute always from the moment that new influence fell upon it. And we call it destiny. We question not whence it came or whither it will lead. It may have been

born with the suns and the worlds, or it may have been born of a word spoken to-day, an action done yesterday, we question not. It is destiny, mere human destiny, and all unworthy of interpretation.

Neither did Irion Floyd make question of destiny then, she only smiled at her own 'impressionability,' she called it, told herself she was 'a fool,' and wondered what there might be in the man to interest her. He was not good-looking, not attractive in any way, physically. 'It must be that strange intensity,' Irion thought, 'which lies around and about him, and gives him so much compelling power. If he be a wicked man, God have mercy upon those who fall into his hands: he will have none. If he be a good man, God comfort him for the suffering which may be his because of the very strength which is in him.'

And so the others talked on, and Irion worked silently. And it was the evening of a new to-morrow.

CHAPTER V.

ONE week had gone by since Gilbert Hurst came home. The family saw very little of him, or of his friend—'Thank the Lord,' Ormund Hurst remarked, between the puffs of his cigar. Gilbert's idea of enjoying a holiday was to 'knock about,' and Lewis, if he did not follow him, sat in his attic, with his dog for company—writing, they concluded—polishing up his drama, before he should generously offer it to the London managers. 'I suppose he thinks there's a scarcity of dramatic talent in London,' Mrs. Betrix remarked to her brother, after he had expressed his thankfulness for the general absence of the two strangers from amongst them.

Perhaps Gilbert knew they did not want his company; perhaps he did not care. He

tore about the house, in and out, up and down, whistling, calling, singing, 'as if he were in the *bush* instead of in Park Place.' A black sheep he always was, and always would be. But his mother loved him. He had come home to see her—'To rejoice her dear old heart,' he said, 'after five years of patient waiting.' And he knew that she loved him, loved him better than any other of her children, only she dare not say so with Mrs. Betrix in the house.

Two or three times Gilbert's Australian friend had come upon Irion alone, working, or reading, or practising, the others being out. Then he had stopped and spoken to her of his own free will, using no conventionalities of any kind, but starting off at once into some curious and unusual subject. He generally asked questions, clear and terse, leaving her to answer them. Then he would argue with her by another question. It was a style of conversation to which she was quite unused. It made her feel strangely ignorant, somehow, and nervous; yet she liked it—it was full of a fascination all its own.

But at other times, if the Hursts were with her, and if, by chance, they all came suddenly face to face with him, Lewis would only wish them a general good-morning, or good evening, and, passing by, go on his way. Mrs. Betrix had tried to subdue him by her gracious magnificence now and again, and Naomi had lifted sleepy grey eyes to his with the listless fascination which was her weapon in society. But they were of no effect, and Mrs. Betrix felt 'small.' She liked to ignore, but not be ignored. She liked to hate, but not to be hated. She was always gracious and pleasant; always well-dressed, and well 'got up.' But all this made no impression upon Mr. Lewis. To him she was nothing more than one of the family, and she knew it, and was bitter against him because of her own failure to attract. Happily, she had not yet discovered that he gave to anyone else amongst them more personality, or Irion had suffered.

But even Irion had not been able to persuade him to go with them to balls, or to the theatres, or to the opera. Yet she knew that almost every night he went there alone.

Gilbert had said so, laughing at Lewis' 'musical mania,' and saying that for himself he preferred 'something more lively.' This unrefined sentiment called up looks of pitying contempt on the faces of his elders and betters, only, unfortunately, Gilbert was impervious to their shafts. So it came about, that, after Claud Lewis had been a week in their family, he was as much a stranger to them as on the first day of his coming.

About this time, one evening, the house was empty, as Irion believed. Darkness was falling over the city. There was twilight and rest for a space before the gas should blaze up, to shame men for their idleness. A lull between the work of the day and the work of the night, a blessed hour of rest. Irion sat by the open window, and sunned herself in the drowsy warmth of this June evening, revelling in laziness. She had tossed herself into the big arm-chair—Naomi's midday bed she called it—and there, hidden behind the window curtains, Irion had gazed out into the street, and thought, and speculated, and romanced of the passers-by. And so, at last, she had fallen asleep.

The family were out, one and all of them. The women had gone to an afternoon reception which Irion looked upon as too 'slow' to merit the trouble of dressing for it. She preferred fostering her strength for a ball that night. Had she not promised six dances to Gilbert Hurst? as an inducement to him to go with them instead of to some Music Hall, which was his custom. Six dances! An impropriety which would have startled her modesty-loving family out of all their pastoral simplicity. Only she was in London, and accountable to no one. The Hursts did not care how she bestowed herself. Life was too crowded for them to take special note of any one amongst the many, so long as that one stood not in their path to obstruct it.

Gilbert was also away from home, 'rigging himself out,' as he called it, for the evening, that he might do honour to Irion as her partner. Mr. Lewis and the dog—they were one man—had gone with Gilbert, Irion believed. Therefore she was alone, and safe in taking an afternoon doze.

The morning-room was long and narrow, with four windows down one side. At the top window Irion sat hidden, and down at the end of the room, opposite the bottom window, was a Broadwood piano, old, solid, stately, well-used, but richer for time and wear. There are few of these good old instruments sent out now—even from the same hands. The old workmen are dead long ago, and the new ones, marching with the times, are for improvement and variety. They are right, doubtless; nevertheless, Mrs. Hurst's drawing-room piano—purchased last year as a novelty! a thing all carved and gilt, and of surpassing magnificence, was but a poor creature after all, when you came to talk with it earnestly.

But earnestness is out of fashion, and gilding is in fashion, and we are happy in our ignorance.

Irion had a soul for music—natural, not forced. Therefore she preferred the old rosewood piano before its well-dressed sister downstairs. When she played, it was always in this morning-room, alone in the twilight.

Now twilight music is delightful—who shall deny it? but twilight dozing is more delightful, if we will only admit it. There was nothing better in all the world, Irion thought, to-day, giving herself over to an epicurean enjoyment of an all-sufficing present.

But she did not sleep long. She was awakened with a start from her dreaming. The piano burst forth, seemingly of its own will, into a full, rich chord of music.

Irion was not a spiritualist, therefore she did not imagine a free gift of melody from the gods. She was not afflicted with any nervous disorder, therefore she did not fancy that thieves had broken in to rob and murder her with stage effects.

None of the Hursts had struck that chord of music, she knew at once, were all of them at home again. There was only one stranger in the house—Gilbert's friend, Mr. Lewis—Mr. Lewis it must be.

And then the one chord of music broke itself up into waves of melody, which rose and fell, and rose and died away, crying aloud with the voice of human passion for

love, or pity, or release. It was the cry of human weariness seeking rest and finding none.

And the cry moved Irion to tears.

She would not speak, lest he should stop and go away from her, shunning her as he seemed to shun all womankind and most of men. Yet there were moments when he was so gay! Sitting in the smoking-room alone with Gilbert, Irion, passing by, had oftentimes heard him laughing and joking with boyish foolishness. Joking with the dog generally, and making Gilbert join in the sport.

The more Irion saw of this man, the stranger she thought him, the more interest compelling, the more apart from all other. But perhaps it was only her own fancy. Mrs. Betrix had no such impression of him, evidently, and Naomi only looked upon him as an amusing 'variety,' of the serio-comic order. 'Let it be her own fancy then,' Irion answered herself; 'it was at least pleasant to feel interested in something beyond her own clothes.'

But at the present moment the music was

everything; himself, and herself, and a world beyond. Playing, the like of which she had never heard before, sounds more perfect than any speech—music!

Irion tried to remain quiet and hidden, but because of her anxiety, an evil-minded nature set about to play her a practical joke. She was seized with a cough, the longer and the louder that she had struggled to keep it in subjection.

Claud Lewis stopped playing, and looking across the room, saw the skirts of Irion's dress under the window curtain. He would have walked away silently as he came were, such an act possible to him as a gentleman. But it was not. The most ordinary calls of civility demanded a remark, an apology perhaps, only Claud Lewis never apologised; apologies were not in his nature and therefore quite impossible to him.

'I did not know there was any one in the room,' he said, turning half round on the music-stool, 'or I should not have taken my amusement just now.'

'No? then you would have deprived me of

one of the greatest treats I have ever had,' she answered, leaving her place and going nearer to the piano.

'You care for music?' he questioned.

'More than for any other of the good things which are ours to enjoy.' A pause, then, taking a seat about a yard from him: 'You are a great genius, it strikes me, Mr. Lewis. A dramatist, a poet, a musician, as discovered. What lies in the back-ground, please?' jestingly.

'Much that will never come forward, I hope,' he answered, so seriously as to jar with her question. It had the effect of changing her gay mood to his melancholy one.

'We have all hidden weaknesses, but we have not all genius,' she said earnestly.

'And how much does it profit us if we have it?'

'What do you mean?'

'I take the present instance. You *say* I have genius—whether you *think* so or not is beyond the question. You *know* I have run through half my life, and that I am nobody—

nothing. How am I better than the veriest idiot existing?'

'Probably you might have been—possibly the fault is your own.'

'Possibly!' he echoed, striking another chord upon the piano—a wailing, imploring chord, as Irion read it. It found no answer with her; she was never moved to pity for a squandered life, for wantonly wasted talents. She had a contempt for all weakness in men, therefore she answered coldly.

'You should not admit the probability.'

'As well admit it as know it, surely.'

'Certainly not; a man may be silent for the honour of his manhood, sometimes!'

'The honour of his manhood is as other men shall rate it. Suppose he stand alone, utterly alone. What question will there be of his manhood or his honour? what question of anything respecting him? what question of his existence even? Why should he struggle?'

'For his own satisfaction, surely?'

'There is little enough of satisfaction in *living* for one's self alone; less in *struggling*

for mere self-gratification. The great inducement to rise is the pride which others will feel in our success. At least, if this be not our reward, I fail to see any.'

'I should find much satisfaction in compelling strangers to acknowledge me. But we will grant your possibility of caring so little about self that self-gratification is no gratification. I still do not believe in any man, or any woman either, standing so utterly alone in the world, that no single person shall be found to sorrow or joy in their fate. We all belong to some one, and the mere fact of possession is enough to cause interest.'

'We all did belong to some one—granted. Some of us may have forfeited our right even to being—*property*.'

'Only through crime, surely! and even a criminal can generally boast one friend who will stick by him till death; who, right or wrong, will love him always.'

'Could you be such a friend?' he asked, running his fingers over the keys in a low, heart-moving cadence.

'Certainly, provided of course I had loved

the man or the woman before he or she became a criminal; or before I knew of the crime, which is the same thing in the end. What's done can't be undone, you see, and we cannot change our natures because we find our god a mortal. We may be disappointed; we may be sorry for his short-comings; but loved once is loved always, I should say.'

He did not answer her. There was a long silence, save for occasional chords of music, thrown off as if for the relief of some mental suffering. Irion quite expected him to leave her now. But he sat there still, dreamily staring at the keys. Suddenly he turned to her.

'To refute your theory,' he said, '*I have no friend.*' He was not speaking sentimentally, but bitterly, ironically. 'I did not find that in practice people condoned one's faults so nobly. I sinned—and they turned their backs upon me, to a man.'

'Possibly you did not seek their forgiveness, did not show that you wanted their protection. People will not cast their bread upon the waters, you see.'

'And knowing their want of faith as to finding it, I did *not* ask them to. You are right again; the fault is my own. But the fact remains. *I have no friend*—and as a natural consequence—no ambition.'

'Gilbert Hurst?' she suggested.

'He does not know me,' was the reply, with a low, self-deriding laugh.

'You talk of having no ambition, and yet you come all the way to England to get a play brought out on the London stage, because, according to Gilbert, your colonial actors would "make a hash of it." How may you be pleased to name the desire which moved you to so much energy?'

'I must write,' he answered; 'I could not live without it. It is bread and wine to me—the food and stimulant of life. Without it I should have been in a self-dug grave long ago. My writings, and my dog, are the only things in life for which I have any respect. I would do them all possible honour.'

'And in honouring them—one of them, at least—do you not honour yourself?'

'No.'

'How so?'

'No man will know the author of that play, let its success be never so great.'

'If you think you are going to put candles under a bushel in England you are mistaken,' she said, laughing at her new trade of female mentor. 'If your deeds are worthy, they will be visited upon you sooner or later.'

'And what if they be unworthy?' he asked, with a ring of bitterness such as Irion had never before heard.

'Unworthy!' she answered mockingly; 'well, if they are unworthy, it is certainly better that they and you should lie in the obscurity you court. Little fear that any one will *force* you to be great *against* your own unworthiness. Not that I believe you or any one else thinks himself unworthy. You are trying the effect of a new theory on a young and impressionable audience. But please remember that in 1879 there's no such thing as impressionability.

'I should have thought Naomi Hurst was speaking to me,' he said, contemptuously.

Irion felt the cut, only she did not know

what had come over her, that in the presence of this man she must always be to some extent unnatural. She had always a sense of acting something, to hide something else; an uncomfortable self-consciousness with every word she spoke to him, as though he must weigh it, and measure it, and scorn it for its worthlessness. She had only known him two weeks, and already she feared him, or—loved him, or—'something absurd,' as she told herself.

And he was so strange with her too, so different from himself as the others were made to see him. He might even like her less than he liked them, for he rarely spoke to her in their presence, so that one day Mrs. Betrix had remarked to her:

'Irion, my poor dear, you have certainly offended his Majesty the King of the Cannibal Islands. He hates you just one degree more than he does me. We are both greatly to be pitied, I'm sure.'

And judging from his general manner, Mrs. Betrix was justified.

But somehow Irion felt that it was not so.

She believed that inasmuch as he stood apart with her, so she stood apart with him ; apart so far as the people amongst whom he now lived were concerned. It was quite possible, she knew, that in his own country things were different. There, she might be only one of a crowd in his thoughts ; but here, at this moment, she was certain of a place apart in his life.

It was this knowledge which made her self-conscious in his presence.

Possibly she might have tried to answer his taunt that she was talking after the fashion of Naomi Hurst—tried to defend herself—had she not heard the voices of the others at the bottom of the stairs. They had come home.

'Are you not to be persuaded into going with us to Lady Caxton's to-night?' she asked instead, launching into commonplaces.

'I never dance now,' he answered her in the same tone. 'But it is time for me to be off. We promised Hurst to meet him on his way home, Bimboo and I—didn't we, old man?' lifting up the dog's face to his, and

bestowing upon it one of those rare looks of touching softness; 'come along, old boy.'

And so he left her, going into the smoking-room until the others had passed up the stairs; then out of the house, and away towards Piccadilly.

CHAPTER VI.

On Saturday afternoon the Hursts always drove out of London, 'to vegetate,' as Mrs. Betrix called it, for the coming Sunday. Not that Mrs. Betrix was ever guilty of 'vegetating.' Even Sunday has its business in June. Sunday is an important part of the programme. To slur it over in rural simplicity were to lose something of your standing as a woman of fashion. Therefore Mrs. Betrix was not of the country party, neither Mr. Ormond Hurst. These two did duty for the others in London. There *are* some people who prefer smoke to sunshine, the voices of men to the voices of nature, fatigue to rest. Incredible, of course, but a fact.

Last year Irion had often chosen to remain

in London on Sunday. She had not cared to waste one precious moment of her new existence over what was to her a second self. All her life she was amongst trees and flowers, 'a very part of them,' she said, 'with not half as much use in me as they.' Last year Irion had argued that soon enough she would have no choice but to content herself with country mildness, but that being allowed something stronger for the moment, she would drink it to the dregs. She had come to London, to do as London did, to taste of novelty, and satiate herself with delight.

That was last year!

This year she had said the same, and thought the same for the space of — two weeks. Then everything was changed— suddenly—as it were in a night.

'What is the meaning of it all?' she began asking herself. 'What the satisfaction? What the end to be reached? You are better dressed, or better looking than your neighbour—to-morrow you are fifty! You drive in a costlier carriage this morning—

to-night you lie in a grave! You have lived, and you have died, and that is the end. There has been no result of your existence, no known creature has benefited by it. You have not added one jot to the world's beauty, one tittle to its greatness or its worth! Nothing remains—nothing—after struggling, and wearying, and fretting away the days and the months and the years. You have not even sought after peace, choosing rather strife and warfare, fighting ever for—nothing but a grave! It is all vanity and vexation of spirit,' Irion told herself to-day, in this new state of being which had come upon her.

And so she was going to the country. They drove through the may-loaded lanes, where the air blew sweet upon them, and the sun shone, and the birds sang their welcome. Nothing was different from what Irion had been used to see it, yet nothing seemed the same.

For side by side with her sat Claud Lewis. And what of him? Only this—*She had learned to love him.* It was no use pre-

tending that she did not know herself; no use shutting her eyes and stopping her ears, and making herself blind and deaf to her own folly, as we are all so fond of doing for the benefit of some social mock modesty. It lay on Irion's nature to face the truth, and the truth was that she loved Gilbert Hurst's eccentric friend; loved him with such a love as she had always felt herself capable of giving; a love which, casting aside all obstacles, would fight bravely for the possession of its own; would live fighting, and die fighting, perhaps, but never give up.

And what was worse, she felt certain that he loved her—certain—and he said no word, made no sign; certain with an unmaidenly and immodest conceit; certain with the pitiable weakness of a faith which, scorning proof, stands, fool-like, in the security of its own conviction.

Only somehow Irion did not feel guilty of any wrong in all this, for which the world (had it known) had only smiled upon her pityingly, accounting her ignorant after the manner of all believers, or puffed up with

self-conceit like all professors of a faith which is beyond proof. Poor world! Poor Irion! one of you is wrong. And beliefs are out of fashion.

So they drove on through the June-dressed lanes—the 'Row' of the song-birds, who welcomed their coming so noisily, yet envied them nothing of all their worldly possessions. And they drove over the hills, where the setting sun poured lavish gold over them, nor asked for any in return. And they drove under century-old trees, who in their courteousness bowed to them as if they had been princes of the soil. Such homage the Hursts had never found in Park or ball-room, for all their wealth. Yet it was of no account with them. It was only a free gift of nature—and valueless.

One person rejoiced with the birds and the beasts in this beautiful summer evening—Claud Lewis. He was silent, and, as the others fancied, morose, answering their frequent and evidently forced questions tersely, as though they troubled him. It was health to him, and strength, to be out in the free air

again. He had hated the city, and he hated himself for having been persuaded to enter it. What had he hoped for? To what had he looked forward? He did not know. A mere feeling of restless excitement had impelled him; a sort of childish longing to see what it would feel like. And he had seen, and he had felt, and he derided himself for his own foolishness. It was all disappointment and emptiness. It had given him none of the satisfaction he sought. It had only taken from him a hard-earned content in his life's nothingness. Irion Floyd had robbed him of this. Irion, with her high-flown notions of greatness, with her strong belief in man's power. Irion, with unbroken faith and unbounded trust! She had come across his path, and without a word of blame had shamed him for his nothingness. She had sympathised with him, and understood him, and seen what of good was in him; yet she had shamed him. To her he was not worthless, yet because of her he found himself tenfold more worthless, because he was *not* what she believed him.

He was greater, and he was less—but not the same.

And now they were going to spend one day apart from the emptiness of a crowd. He should have some country walks with her probably, and some quiet talks, and for once feel himself not alone. This was the manner of his thinking as he sat silent at her side, driving towards Hillfields. Claud Lewis had no definite idea as to the end of it all. He had made no plans; only, with the desperation of a starved nature, he was grasping at happiness as food to satisfy his craving; yes, though the penalty were a prison or death on the morrow. Of Irion he had not thought; it had not for a moment struck him that she did or could love him. He only knew that what he felt for her was love, but he was secure in its one-sidedness.

Naomi Hurst was also of the party driving to Hillfields. A cousin would be there, a youth who loved her with youth's blind impetuosity. Now it is pleasant enough to be loved if you are not troubled about a return. Vere Penrose always noticed Naomi's

costumes, and had the intelligence to remark every time she 'sported' something new. So Vere Penrose found favour before some others of Naomi's admirers. Vere Penrose had a happy, if self-created, faith that in the end Naomi would be his wife. Naomi herself entertained no such extravagant idea. But it was, as has been said, very pleasant to be loved, and Vere was very useful to her—as an auxiliary. He gave her handsome presents, which she accepted—but then he was her cousin, and had two thousand a year pocket-money! Who would object? If he was foolish enough to fancy such graciousness on her part meant marriage, let him. She, at least, had never said so. Vere was a 'chum' of Gilbert's, as he took frequent occasion to tell their mutual acquaintance, lest perchance they should look upon him as too much of a boy to be any man's chum. The fact is, that Vere Penrose had an unfortunate way of never looking out of his teens; hairless of face, and small of stature, he could never persuade the world to credit him with his two-and-twenty years. Even

Naomi *would* call him a boy—and she knew how long he had been out of his boyhood with regard to loving her! Men didn't *call* him a boy, only they had an unpleasant way of ignoring him, and girls in a ball-room unblushingly refused to dance with him, for all his thousands present and prospective. Vere Penrose had not found that money was everything. He would have given up much, possibly all of his fortune, for a foot more of height, and several measures more of dignity. But then Vere Penrose was a 'fool,' everybody said so. Unfortunately, Vere himself had no such idea. He believed himself capable of everything, if only opportunity favoured him. But opportunity was so perverse; other fellows had a chance—he never. It was very hard that when he stood with his hands in his pockets and called so loud for fame, fame refused to come to him. He was not particular either as to kind or form—literary fame, artistic fame, dramatic fame—one would be as welcome as the other. And he was quite sure that in so far as he was concerned, one or all were possible to him. It was not

altogether an idle conceit either; natural genius was his undoubtedly, only an unnatural dislike to application somewhat dimmed its brilliancy.

Nevertheless, Vere Penrose was a welcome visitor at Hillfields. He was not driving with the Hursts, but they expected him to ride over later. Irion liked the fellow for the good which was in him, and he liked her because she never twitted him with his size and his youth as Naomi and others so often amused themselves by doing. It was a practical way they had of 'joking,' which gave poor Penrose many unpleasant stabs, although he did laugh so 'good-naturedly' at their teazing.

Irion was thinking of poor Vere, and Naomi's passive ill-usage of him, as they drove along the lanes to Hillfields. Naomi herself was sitting opposite, and looking as serene as though she never illused anybody. But although Irion's thoughts were of others, she felt her own personality. Sitting by the side of Claud Lewis, touching him, she was certain now that for her *life* meant *him*. He did not

speak to her, not one single word in all the journey; a silence absolutely rude, only that she knew its meaning so well. And yet she could not for a moment cease to feel his presence.

And this was love! love come upon her at last. Well, it was not at all what she had fancied. There was very little pleasure in it, and a great deal of pain; a feeling of utter helplessness, and a sense of extreme foolishness. 'It might be different, of course,' she argued, gravely, 'if I had any hope of marrying him, but I have not. I am sure he would never civilise himself into wife-taking. If he finds I am too much for his feelings, he will go away out of my path.' Irion smiled at her own thoughts, and Naomi, seeing the smile, remarked, as if talking in her sleep—

'How one envies you, Irion! to be able to laugh on a dusty road, with the setting sun in one's eyes. What can there be amusing in it?'

CHAPTER VII.

HILLFIELDS was a fine estate, spreading itself over two hill-tops and a broad wooded valley. A little new perhaps about the house and pleasure-grounds, but saved from the coldness of novelty by the thickly-growing forest trees which still claimed the ground as their own property, stretching their arms over it protectingly. They lent respectability to the young plantations of ornamental firs and flowering shrubs, and saved the grounds from being open to the stigma of newness. They were wide-spreading and laid out with artistic taste (bought), and the result was that Hillfields was the show place of the neighbourhood, and George Hurst, Esq., its proud possessor! The house had the grace to look old, if it was new. Built of red brick, low,

irregular and gabled, it peeped at you softly from amongst the trees, instead of staring, white and ghastly, in your eyes, and frightening you with its gauntness. Hillfields was a very good imitation of an old family estate; it only wanted twenty years of time laid over it to give it a century of dignity. If time could have been purchased, with the rest, Hillfields were perfect. But Time stands beyond the reach of gold.

And life at Hillfields was, as the place, a fair imitation of life in the counties, only wanting a little practice to make perfect—a little use to sit as second nature on the actors. There was game preserving, and game shooting, and fox hunting, and trout fishing. It was all perfect if you knew no better; and very enjoyable if you were reckless of cost. Very respectable under any circumstances, and very substantial. Hillfields was always crowded with visitors. One of the inducements to 'know' the Hursts was that you might be asked to Hillfields for the autumn shooting. This would save you the expense of the sea-side, or the Continent, and be

quite as amusing. Or your daughters might be asked to tennis parties, or *fêtes champêtres* —and young men in the country are so impressionable! Or your sons might pick up a millionaire's daughter—nearly all the people about Hillfields were millionaires! Yes, Hillfields was an addition to the social worth of George Hurst and family, and it was worthy of respect.

On Sunday morning the family went to church. It was the right thing to do in the country, and an occasion for dressing. Vere Penrose went also; he liked making 'notes' on the congregation, and exchanging them with Naomi behind Irion's back. Of course, Naomi always sneered at them, but she read them, nevertheless, and that was satisfaction enough for Vere. Irion alone went to pray. Praying and living seemed to her one and the same state to-day.

But neither Gilbert Hurst nor his friend favoured church. It was too 'slow' for the first, and altogether apart from the other. Claud Lewis could as soon have gone into a church and knelt there to pray before the face

of all people, as have stood up in the streets and called for pity from the gaping crowd. One and the other were only to make him scorn himself, by proving his own insignificance.

Therefore Gilbert Hurst and Claud Lewis went for a walk on this Sunday morning. Gilbert wanted to see the gamekeeper about pheasant-hatching, and Lewis wanted to give Bimboo a run. So they set out together. Walking side by side across the fields, with the June sun shining over them and the June flowers growing around them, they felt that life was worth the having, if only for the physical delight of living and moving, the sense of their own lightness of limb and joyfulness of heart.

'Reminds me of that day out at Hajapool, don't you remember, when we slew the two score?' Hurst said, with boyish enthusiasm.

'What could have suggested that now?'

'Don't know, unless it's the sheep.'

'Are sheep supposed to be suggestive of kangaroos?'

'There's a family likeness about the wag of the ear. But look here, old fellow, now I've

got you, I intend to have something out of you—if I can. You grow more and more satanic. Wake up, do! How do you find our snug little island, now you know her?'

'Much the same as any other I have tried. We always fancy *place* will have something to do with our lives. We think that because we are here or there, we shall *be* this or that. Quite a mistake. We are always ourselves.'

'How about the infant?' jokingly.

'What infant?' quite gravely.

'The prodigy in three acts, who is to astonish the world, you know, when some discriminating person awakes to a sudden sense of its genius.'

'Oh! the play. In my box.'

'What a queer fellow you are, by Jove! Six months ago you were all agog to see it come out.'

'Yes,' dreamily, 'I didn't know,' with a short low laugh.

'What the deuce brought you to England, then?'

'Curiosity, I think. To see what it would

feel like. A reason I once heard a woman give for getting drunk.'

'Well, and the result; hot coppers, eh?'

'I shall turn round and go back again.'

'Hang it all, not before I do! Why? Can't you stand another six weeks of the Betrix?'—wickedly, 'not even with the charming Irion Floyd as an antidote?'—a pause—no answer from the other. 'Awfully jolly girl, Irion, isn't she?'

'Don't know what you mean by "jolly." I shouldn't call her jolly,' satirically.

'Wonder why you don't get on with her, now? To my thinking she's the best of the lot; best girl I know, out and out.'

'When was not your last your best, old man?' he asked, with the smile which sat so softly upon his face now and again.

'That's better, anyhow, than never finding anyone to one's taste, like you. Perhaps you'll try to argue that she's not good-looking.'

'N—n—no,' doubtfully, 'she's nice-looking.'

'Heard some men at the club saying of

her, that if she showed much in London, she'd become one of *the beauties.* Fancy Irion Floyd a London beauty! Wonder how she'd stand it?'

'Come to grief probably, like all your *beauties!*' Lewis answered, with a sneer of utter contempt for the class. He was not speaking of Irion personally. Hurst mistook him.

'By Jove! there's no understanding you, Lewis. I'd have sworn that if you could possibly so far reduce yourself to the common level as to like any girl, you'd have liked her.'

'Perhaps it might be unlucky for you if I did.'

'Why, in the name of all that's mysterious?'

'Might cut you out, you know.'

'All right, cut away, old fellow; I give you free leave! It would be such a joke to see Claud Lewis paring and trimming that it's worth the price. By Jove! you in love! I couldn't picture it.'

'Don't try. It wouldn't be a good subject for a picture. I've a way of over-doing things.'

'Not love. Come now, you never over-did love, I'll swear.'

'N—n—no!' with the same low laugh. Then, after a pause, 'I think you know very little about me, Hurst.'

'Then I ought to be kicked; after five years' living under the same roof.'

'Does time guarantee knowledge?'

'Don't know what it does; it ought to, unless every one was such a self-centred beast as you are. Tell you what it is, you're a delusion and a snare. Don't believe you are one bit what you pretend to be.'

'I am quite sure I am not.'

'Honest, at any rate! but—— Oh, by Jove! look! two, four, six, eight—there they go—*bang!*' and Gilbert Hurst shouldered an imaginary gun, took an imaginary aim, and talked game for the remainder of the way. Lewis looked relieved at the change; he encouraged the game topic—it was safe ground, and pleasant to walk over. Old, well-trodden ground of 'bush' adventure which they had gone through together out in the Australian wilds, which they hoped to go

through again for many seasons; which they *planned* to go through, as if to-morrow would see them on the spot. Claud Lewis was a new man under the new influence. He laughed with Gilbert as a boy might laugh over the remembrance of some young adventure. He romped with the dog, treating it as a child, and making it display the knowledge he had given it, for Hurst's benefit. And Hurst could only look upon him, and wonder at him. To know this man were but to marvel more and more at the strange changeability of his mood, which a word, or a suggestion, would move to the extremes of light or shade.

Gilbert, although his tongue wagged excitedly of kangaroo and deer, of pheasants and snipe, did not *feel* as the other, even on these things. He could be thinking of twenty matters the while; Irion, perhaps, just now, or the *prima donna* of last night, or any other 'sensation.' Not so Claud Lewis. What he did was done with an intensity almost painful in its all-absorbingness. It seemed as if he were staking his very life upon every thread;

winning sometimes, and losing sometimes; cowering under the pain or filled with the delight, but speaking never a word.

So in lightness of spirit they finished their walk to the gamekeeper's—these two who were already costumed and drilled, and waiting behind the scenes to come forward and play their parts in the play of Life, were it a tragedy, or were it a comedy.

They knew nothing. They were sleep-walking.

CHAPTER VIII.

It was a custom at Hillfields to wander out after dinner—the whole party, young and old—to listen to the nightingales.

Away in the valley there was a lake, or such they called it. A wild and beautiful spot it was, with trees round about it, and great clumps of yellow gorse and islands with water-fowl; and a boat upon it. Two acres of water perhaps, but wandering away so stealthily into the wood, and losing itself so cunningly amongst the trees, that it might have been a very lake for any boundary that could be seen to measure it. And the water-fowl liked it, for they always nested there; and the kingfishers liked it, for they always played there, flashing from the willow boughs like jewels in the sunshine.

But above all the nightingales favoured this lake, mocking one another in the moonlight over the breadth of the waters from the trees on either side; claiming their ground, and defying intrusion, and seeing who could shout the loudest for victory in the love chase. Right merry they were, and proud, and defiant one of the other, and it did the heart good to listen to them.

The song of the nightingale is not sentiment. That is all a mistake of our own making.

So after dinner the party wandered out; together at first, but breaking up into twos and threes later as they found themselves further from the house. They walked round the lake, and listened for awhile; talked of rheumatism and nightingales in a breath; grew tired of 'midnight monotony,' and went away again. One or two 'imprudent' couples stayed behind, finding their own company compensation enough for the monotony of the nightingales and the moonlight. Of these a 'foolish' couple, on this Sunday evening, remained sitting under a willow tree,

close to the water, after the rest were safely back in the warm rooms. No one missed them.

They were Irion and Claud Lewis.

For some time they had been silent, leaving all talk to the two nightingales who were mocking each other, or flattering each other (there is not much difference between them) from the larch boughs overhead. Presently—

'Do you believe in a future state?' Claud asked, with that sudden intensity which was natural to him.

'Of course I do,' Irion answered, unhesitatingly, in the strength of her young faith.

'You believe in a conscious, individual existence—a personality?'

'Who could be happy otherwise? Who good?'

'*I do not,*' he said, speaking each word distinctly.

'Not believe! Not look forward to another and greater existence to which your endeavours here have raised you! Not believe in

a result of your earthly labours! Surely, everything produces something?'

'In the aggregate—yes; not in the individual. I believe that I am a part of some great progressive scheme, and that acting in unison with the rest, I shall produce some result proportionate with the force I have expended. But that I—as a personality—shall remain conscious of that personality after the atoms which compose my earthly body shall have passed into a thousand other earthly bodies, I do not believe.'

'But why not? You have left your soul out of the question. It is, as you say, the body which is put to other earthly uses. I do not believe in a bodily resurrection either; but if I did not feel that men have souls, I should see no inducement to raise ourselves above the beasts of the field—no reward for well-doing.'

'The reward is as it affects our fellow-men and our present state of being, taken as a state. The result of evil is deterioration; and I tell you that I allow an ultimate good, a universal destiny, a completion.' A silence,

then turning round, and looking straight into her face in the moonlight, he said, with that intensity which was himself: 'Do you know, Miss Floyd, if you could lead me, or compel me, into your faith, you might save me from an act of pitiable cowardice some day.'

'What *can* you mean?' earnestly, half-frightened at his passion-moved tone.

'From self-destruction! Yes; you need not turn away from me, you who have friends and relations, and a place amongst your fellows — a place allowed you by general consent, not one battled for by yourself, with lying and subterfuge—a mere standing-ground at best, robbed by treachery from men, who, if they knew you were there, would kick you back into the dirt from which you raised yourself. You and yours can talk about the worthiness of living, and the baseness of dying, but I tell you that if it were not for a sense of the ridiculous which stays me, the waters of that pond would close over me to-night.' He spoke with mockery, not pathos.

'You do not mean what you say!' she cried

out, with a ring of exceeding pain, turning her head sharply away from him, for she knew that tears had filled her eyes, that her tell-tale lips were trembling, and that the moonlight would betray her to him presently.

'Listen,' he said, bending towards her. Again there was in his voice that clang of irony which pained Irion more than all his melancholy; it was the very essence of self-scorning scornfulness. 'Listen: I tried to bring about my end once *and failed, failed!* and stood a very idiot in my own sight, a laughing-stock to my own self! Since that time a sense of the ridiculous has always stood side by side with my desire for the end of all this mockery of living. It has kept me from repeating the burlesque I once saw myself play. But if for one day, one hour perhaps, that sense of the ridiculous shall leave me, the curtain will fall upon one more hunted dog found dead in a gutter, and nobody caring, because it was only a dog——'

'Don't,' she interrupted him; 'don't!' with a cry of pain which was forced from her by his bitterness, by the whole man torturing

himself in needless cruelty. And as she spoke, all unknown to herself, she laid her hand upon his, which was tightly clenched over his knee: 'Don't! I cannot bear to know you less a man than I believed you, I cannot——' but she suddenly stopped, and drew back her hand, remembering that it was her heart which had been pleading for him, and feeling ashamed.

But that one half-minute's touch had told him all. In that moment he knew she loved him, as he her; passionately, recklessly, for good, or for evil. But he could not speak now. And there surged suddenly, as a wave over them both, the mystical rise and fall of passion's silence.

And the clouds hid the face of the moon.

Presently he put out his hand, and taking one of hers, held it tightly clasped, but still he did not speak. She had no wish to resist him, no power if she wished; for better or for worse, she was his. Why deceive herself —or him?

'And I was more self-blinded than ever!' he said presently, speaking very low, in a

voice of infinite sweetness and gladness. 'I said I was alone, and I am *not* alone. Tell me that I am not alone, Irion; let me hear that some one loves me—Irion, tell me so—darling!'

She turned towards him, and looking in his face, said, evasively as far as words went, assuringly in voice and manner:

'No one is quite alone; I told you so before.'

Then he moved closer to her, and put his arms about her.

'And you will never let me feel alone again, Irion; you will stand by me to give me strength? I am not naturally weak, darling. With you as my wife I can do all that becomes a man; be all that you would see me. I have the power,' he said, confidently now; and she answered him, laughing,

'That remains to be proved!'

'Sceptic!' he said, and claimed the price of her submission, the proof of her love, the first kiss that the lips of man had ever known from Irion Floyd.

Then there was silence again, and a flood

of moonlight, and a burst of song from the nightingales. And two lives merging into one.

'But Irion,' he asked presently, drawing her closer still, 'have you thought of what you have done? You have exiled yourself for life, you have parted yourself from all your friends, all your relations, all your old, happy life—and for *me*. Did you remember that our home will be in Melbourne, Irion? the breadth of the world between you and yours!'

'The beginning and the end of mine is here,' she answered him.

'But before you are certain, dear one, I want you to recall what I said to you one day—that evening when we sat together at the piano—do you remember? The evening when I first knew that I loved you, Irion. I told you something. Do you recall it?'

She thought a moment, then—

'You told me you were friendless,' she answered gaily; 'and almost drove me to the desperation of contradicting you. You little guessed what self-restraint I had to practise in that moment to prevent an

unbecoming display of my own loyalty in your cause.'

'You loved me even then?'

'Yes.'

'God bless you, darling! But don't let me forget what I was asking you, lest the opportunity slide by for ever. Why was I friendless?'

'Because of something you had done, or fancied you had done, of which your once friends disapproved—poor friends those, it strikes me. You were wise to make new ones.'

'Now, listen to me, Irion—mark every word, for in all earnestness I beseech you,' he took both her hands in his, and spoke very low, with the power which it was always his to use. 'Those friends were right to turn from me as they saw me; as they were *justified* in seeing me. I deserved their condemnation. That is all I can tell you, Irion; all I can ever tell. Darling!'—passionately—'can you be my wife, and know that for ever and for ever there will live a secret between us—the secret of a past

shame? Darling, I *could not* soil your life with it. I would rather never marry you. If you cannot walk over the grave of that secret, Irion, daily, hourly, without a wish to dig it up, tell me so now, before it is too late. Tell me, and I will go from you a stranger as I came. But I will never tell you of that fall which changed my whole life. As I am, so you must judge of me—as you will know me, my darling—as your husband.'

He bent over her, holding her tightly, almost to pain. She heard him gasp in eagerness for her reply. She only raised her eyes to his, and, passing her hand over his forehead, answered simply:

'Claud, I love you.'

'And will trust me always?'

'Always.'

'And if, in the course of our lives, men should come to you, and, knowing my story, tell you what I have refused to let you know, you will not say I deceived you into loving me, you will not turn round upon me and curse me?'

'Hush! Claud, hush! I cannot bear these

moods; curses are the followers of crimes, not faults.'

'And I am a cri—— Well, no,' checking himself; 'no, I am *not* a criminal *quite*,' he said, with the old derisive laugh, which always jarred so painfully against the natural intensity of his manner. And Irion, seeing that he was falling back into the self-taught cynicism, which it seemed his pleasure now and again to encourage for his own self-debasement, rose from her seat, and standing before him, offered him, of her own free will, the kiss of a woman's absolute trust.

'I have no delight in looking backwards ever,' she said to him; 'I would rather look forwards always, Claud. We cannot recall the past, but we can make a future, you and I; or, if we fail, the fault will be our own. Let us believe in one another, that is all. A little faith, and our world becomes a paradise.'

'What confidence you have in life and mankind, Irion!' he answered her, but with a depth of sweetness in his tone that thrilled upon her like the chords of music which he

struck once in her hearing, calling into active life the love which had been sleeping.

And so they moved away from the seat under the willow-tree.

It had not taken long to think and to speak the prologue of a life, Half an hour! to change the destiny of—a world it might be, since from new causes must spring new effects, and from effects substances. And every wave of motion, every wave of sound, scatters movement through the universe; things are not what they are, but what they do and what they bring, and *results* are the world's wages.

'We must be married soon, Irion,' he said to her, walking towards the house.

'As you will,' she answered, without making a show of resistance.

'How long shall you be preparing for a voyage and a new life, in a new climate? You must not ruin yourself or your family in purchases. We shall not be poor, Irion. For the first time in my life my money will be a satisfaction to me: it will make you happy.'

'When did money ever make happiness?'

she asked, with the splendid contempt of a 'county family' for wealth.

'It has saved a great many from being unhappy.'

'You, for one!' she added, satirically.

She knew that Claud Lewis was a rich man; Gilbert had always said so, and of herself she had discovered that he was not a happy man. He had told her so. And yet he would pretend to her that money could bring happiness. For a moment she felt rather angry at his sophistry.

'Don't evade my question,' he said, evading hers nevertheless. 'How long must I wait for you?'

'Make your own bargain.'

'A month?'

'Don't you think to-morrow would be advisable?' she answered, laughing, for they were very near the house now.

'I have my reasons, Irion.'

'So be it.'

He was about to pay her for her submission, but the voice of Naomi Hurst talking to her youthful adorer was just then heard close to

them; and the form of Naomi side by side with Vere Penrose came out into the moonlight in front of them. Naomi, seeing them, joined them. To her it was a matter of course that they should have stayed behind at the lake, if night dews and frogs were to their taste. Naomi was never surprised at anything; but then Naomi never wanted any one else to think as she thought. She preferred billiards, even with Vere, to nightingales and disordered clothes. So Naomi had played billiards whilst the others walked; and she was now torturing poor Vere on the terrace, where it was 'clean walking and level.' Naomi had a horror of hills, they were fatiguing; and Naomi shunned fatigue, as one of the great evils of life, to be avoided at any cost.

But they all went into the house now, Irion alone feeling that to-morrow would not be as to-day for her, nor any other to-morrow in all her life to come.

CHAPTER IX.

IRION went into Naomi's bedroom after the fashion of girls, to tell her the news.

'Guess what has happened,' she said, doing three steps of a waltz before Naomi prostrate in the arm-chair.

'I know,' stretching and yawning.

'What *can* you know now? you only say that because you hope to escape being bothered about other people's affairs. Now what *do* you know?'

'That you and the Aborigine are amusing yourselves with imagining you are in love with one another. Very entertaining no doubt, but stale, very stale.'

Naomi spoke without the slightest show of energy or interest. It was 'her way,' as Irion called it.

'You are nearer the point than I had thought possible in you, considering your general dulness of understanding; but if you *will* pretend to be blind and deaf, how can one credit you with common-sense? Well, yes, we are going to be married—there!'

'Dear me—when?'

'Next month.'

'Who's going to make your dress?' sleepily.

'You horror! can't you offer some more sensible remark when I come to you to pour out my love affairs into your sisterly keeping?'

'One reserves one's *sensible* remarks for the wedding breakfast, my dear.'

There was a silence after this. Irion waited for Naomi to say something more, but finding her dumb, added half angrily:

'I don't believe you think this affair is serious. You fancy I am imitating you, and getting up a flirtation because there's nothing better to do just now.'

'No, no, I don't. You are foolish enough and romantic enough for anything.'

'Hurrah! we've dragged an opinion out of

you at last. Now, having committed yourself, suppose you expound. In what am I so foolish, and in what so romantic? And what's the matter with Claud Lewis?'

'You know nothing about him, that's all.'

'Gilbert does, though.'

'Gilbert! Is he your conscience? Poor thing.'

'He stands sponsor for the man's respectability, and what more do you want?'

'I?' opening her huge eyes; 'oh, I don't want anything, thank you.'

'What do *I* want, then, if that pleases you better?'

'You want what a few more people want besides you—common sense.'

'Suppose I prefer love?'

'If that's your argument, there's nothing more to be said—besides, it's awfully late. You may tell me the rest to-morrow, good-night.'

Naomi held up her cheek to be kissed. It was a habit, and meant nothing. Irion, to tease her, gave her an uncompromising hug, called her 'a beast,' and ran off singing.

Irion knew that all this want of sympathy on Naomi's part was an affectation. An affectation which from constant use had become a part of herself, but still, an affectation. If occasion should arise for Naomi Hurst to act with kindly human tenderness, Irion felt, knowing the girl, that she would not be found wanting. Already, on some one or two occasions, when Irion had been ill, Naomi, with the same pretence of carelessness and laziness, had yet gone out of the way to *do* a kindness where deeds, not words, spoke for her. She was a strange mixture of incongruities, but Irion 'believed in her,' as she said.

The next day Irion had to make her engagement public amongst all the Hursts then at Hillfields, and she wrote to her own parents, telling them of her plans. She did not ask their consent. She told them that she loved and had accepted Claud Lewis, and that he would see them soon. She said also that she should return home in a day or two to make her preparations. 'It's a matter of an outfit, you see,' she wrote; 'we are off to

Australia at once. I will be as economical as possible, and with the prudent Eleanor to help me, I shall not ruin you, I hope.'

Eleanor was Irion's elder sister, in whose goodness Irion had perfect faith—and for whose simplicity she had a supreme contempt. But Eleanor was useful, and Irion was not slow to make use of her, after the fashion of young and pretty sisters.

Irion was very happy. Claud Lewis's love was a perfect possession, filling to the full her desire for completeness. It was strong, like himself, and passionate, yet over it lay a marvellous tenderness, which made the earthly seem heaven-sent in its beauty. Irion could only wonder at the man, contrasting what he was, and what he appeared; questioning how the mask could have grown upon him, but doubting never.

And thus the sun rose and set. And Lachesis turned her wheel. And young love made no question of possibilities or probabilities. It was a thing perfect in itself, and by reason of its own perfectness, perfecting all around it.

Even Claud Lewis was a hero now, and a

God in the sight of at least one fanatic worshipper—he who had cried out for human love from the first days of his manhood, asking for bread and receiving a stone.

Yes—even he found himself blessed.

CHAPTER X.

AND after it was all known and all settled, Claud Lewis walking at midnight up and down the terrace alone, was thinking, and planning, and trying to balance his life.

This day he had learnt that Irion lived at Rockford.

And he must go to Rockford to see her parents, to talk with them of his marriage. To Rockford! To Aylmer! Married in Aylmer church! he and Irion Floyd!

If he had known it earlier.

'But it is done now,' he said to himself, pacing up and down in the rain and the wind, perplexing himself with much questioning. 'What are my chances of escape? Twenty years from early youth to late manhood, from lank, fair-haired, girlish-faced boyhood to sun-

browned, muscle-widened middle age. The pampered boy of twenty, the world-worn man of forty! Can there be much likeness between them? He shivered and clenched his teeth—how cold the night was. 'What I have begun I will go on with,' he said, arguing down a weakness or a doubt; 'I will face it all, and if chance be kind, I will escape still. If not, I am only where I was at starting—nowhere, nothing. The people of Rockford will see me, the people of Aylmer will see me; but twenty years! They were babies then, those of them who will come to look upon my marriage. The old of twenty years ago are drivelling idiots now. And I had sworn never again to set my foot in Aylmer! God, how weak we are when love impels us. Love! and I can talk of love as a thing still possible to me. After twenty years I can still feel the agony and the delight; feel as keenly as then, and more purely—I, who had told myself that love was a thing impossible to me now, a dead thing, which could never live again. And yet I stand here, fool-like, loving, and risking everything for love. Every-

thing I have gained for myself in the labour of twenty years—the throwing off of my own identity, the doubting of my own existence. Of a truth I have staked my all on this game. I am playing with the madness of desperation, playing for redemption, for happiness—for very life. Playing on the side of my soul, against chance, or fate, or some such invisible devil. Surely the greater will beat the less, or where is that right which in the end is to conquer the universe, and make gods of men? "The end justifies the means," they say—let us hope there is no sophistry in the argument.'

Claud Lewis laughed aloud, startling some thrushes from their midnight sleep. They flew away screaming, frightened at his untimely joke. Then a mood of softness came upon him, for he had suddenly thought of Irion and her young love all given to him so trustingly. 'And she shall never regret,' he said; 'she at least shall never turn round upon me, and curse me for falling short of her ideal of manhood. For her I will fulfil what nature made it mine to do. I will be

great in the world's eyes, that so I may be great in hers. I have the power; for her I will wield it, till at last the very men who have thrashed me, shall lick the dust at my feet. And for the women, the women who have scorned me, they shall hold me a very god amongst them, and Irion foremost in their ranks. Irion, my darling, my wife.'

And Claud Lewis, alone in the midnight coldness, felt that his eyes were burning with hot human tears, which his strength, not his weakness, had forced from him.

Then the voice of Gilbert Hurst reached him, calling from the window of the billiard-room.

'Lewis.'

'Yes.'

'Where the devil have you absconded all the evening? I've done a dozen pipes and as many sleeps, and think it about time to go to bed. Do you particularly want to be locked out this balmy evening? If so, let me know.'

'I'm coming in.'

'Queer fellow you are, Lewis,' as he came

up to the window and stepped in over the ledge; 'a damp unpleasant body to find amusement in getting wet through. There could be no earthly object in being out to-night. Does love make one waterproof? If so, by Jove, I'll try it! borrow a garment, you know, *pro tem.*, catch me taking it back with me, as you are going to do! No, my boy, not to run the torrents of the next six months off my precious skin. You married!' Gilbert laughed a loud, boisterous laugh, bringing his hand down with a thump on the other's shoulder. 'No; I say, old fellow, it's too much of a joke for any man, that. And a girl too—a genuine article. A woman! By George! Do you remember the big broom with which you swept the whole sex into one mud-pit only a week ago. I tried to pick out one or two, and set them up clean before you just for humanity's sake, but not a bit of it; you would see nothing but the grime on every one of them; they were deceivers all, inconstant, heartless, weak——'

'And the exception proves the rule.'

'Talented remark, that! But I say, old fellow, how about the furniture? Wives won't stand boarded floors and bears' skins. Then the dog. By Jove! there'll be a row. Dog *versus* wife!—back the dog to win in a canter, Lewis.'

'If my wife loves me, she will love what I love, naturally; there will be no question of *putting up;* my friends will become hers, my ways hers.'

'Theoretically; practically, dogs and women don't agree in too close quarters. Do you propose trying it on?'

'Bimboo will have his bed in the corner as usual, side by side with me.'

Lewis spoke angrily; he was not in a mood for being joked. He had never borne good-humouredly with 'chaff' on subjects which to him were serious. From no other man living except Gilbert Hurst would he have stood a word of this good-night banter. The subject of Irion and of his love was to him sacred; the only good and worthy thing (to his thinking) which had come upon him for years. Even Gilbert should not scorn it

with impunity. Therefore to prevent future jarring between them, Lewis said, putting a hand on each of the other's shoulders:

'Once for all, Hurst, old man, listen to me. If my friendship is of any value to you, stop this. Laugh at me behind my back if you will; make what jokss you like about me, so long as I don't hear them. But in my presence confine your chaff to the old subjects. Don't add *her*, or anything regarding her, to the list, or you will see a worse side of my nature than you have known yet. I don't want you to lose *all* respect for me, and if I lose my temper there's no hope. So don't drive me. Do you understand?'

'I understand that a change has come o'er the spirit of your dream. Let us hope it's a pleasant one, that's all. Sleep on, old fellow. I won't wake you with a cold water douche, I promise, even if I do hear you snoring occasionally. Don't look so beastly incredulous—you may trust me.'

And Claud Lewis knew that it was so. Gilbert Hurst was light of spirit, but not light of brain, not heartless. He could

respect the prejudices of his friends, and that is a great bond of friendship. Viewing everything in the light of comedy himself, he could yet allow the tragedy might be behind the curtain; he could not see it—that was all—other men might be less blind.

It was always a mystery to him why Lewis was so morose sometimes; so dull of spirit, so reckless of sweet life. The man had talent and money and friends, if he would accept them, only he deliberately cast them off as though beneath his notice. Gilbert Hurst knew of a dozen families in Melbourne, who, because of Lewis's talent as a writer, both in poetry and prose, would have been proud to put his name on their visiting list, himself in their circle; but he had refused their often-repeated invitations, and they had almost ceased to press him. There were, besides the proprietor of the paper in which Lewis published most of his works—the editors, and the staff generally. One and all of these would have welcomed him amongst them socially. But he preferred solitude, or the company of the beasts of the field.

Gilbert Hurst was the one exception—the one man who could claim friendship with him. He had saved Hurst's life once, and nursed him through a six months' illness, and learned to care for him as we care for anything which troubles us, so that we become less selfish in our own living. Gilbert was a stranger in the country when the accident made him helpless. A stranger having saved him, tended him. There was a hidden sympathy between them, perhaps. But Lewis never spoke it. He never spoke of himself at all. Gilbert had only accepted it as a matter of course that his new friend and nurse was of the country and of the soil. He could talk of twenty years of kangaroo-hunting, of twenty years of bush-wandering, of fevers and sunstrokes, of hungers and thirsts. It was the life of a hunter, a ranger, a farmer, but always life in Australia, of which Lewis spoke.

Therefore Gilbert Hurst had told his family, himself believing—that Lewis was a native of Australia.

Then Hurst had arranged to come 'home,'

and Lewis had himself proposed going with him.

'I have the greatest curiosity to stand on English ground,' he had said, in a strange unnatural voice. Afterwards he had talked about a drama, and getting it brought out in London, as a better reason for his desire to visit England. Gilbert rejoiced greatly; he 'worked' the plan of Lewis's making headquarters with his people; 'worked' it successfully too, against strong opposition on Lewis's part.

That was the beginning. This the end.

The end! Is the end ever—so long as life be in us? We may say it often 'This is the end!' and behold, it is but a new beginning. We believe that we have joyed and sorrowed till joy and sorrow are no longer possible to us. We lie down to sleep, and we say—the end—the end—And to-morrow we wake to know that it was only a dream of peace, an imagination of stillness. We wake to find that noise is raging around us, and we cannot stop our ears; that fevers are consuming us, and we cannot lie still. We cry out for

death—for the end. And a voice answers us from *Eternity:*

'Fool, there was no beginning, how shall an end be?'

Till we would fain deny even our own immortality to purchase *peace.*

CHAPTER XI.

IRION had gone back to Devonshire, and Naomi had gone with her for a week. Naomi had a curiosity to see what real country life might be. Life in an old-world Devonshire village. Life amongst 'ante-diluvian' Devonshire folk. Life surrounded with prejudices—and principles.

Naomi was tired of balls, tired of operas, tired of 'drives,' and 'rows,' and London *fêtes;* tired even of her season's clothes—tired of everything. To visit Irion, in Irion's primitive home, would be something new. She must have new costumes, new manners, new speech—for her old ones would not be understood at Rockford.

Naomi was not of the fools of society. She had not passed through life with shut eyes,

and stopped ears. She did not think the world meant London, and all mankind Londoners. Perhaps it ought to be so, but it was not. And Naomi had a fancy to look on the other picture. She would see for herself whether there might be anything worthy of praise in men, as nature, not art, made them. Poor simple folk, of course, but useful, as a variety, and amusing, as a study—and profitable—yes, decidedly profitable. One is expected to know something of one's kind in all its varieties; enough at least to be able to discuss them over one's champagne with an air of experience and soundness. 'There's no trouble in observing people from a safe distance,' Naomi said. And she went to Rockford.

On Thursday Claud Lewis was to join them at Rockford, and be made known to Irion's family. It was Monday, and they were waiting.

There had been no objection raised to Irion's marriage, provided always that the man himself should be approved; provided too that he could prove himself capable of the

charge in a social and financial point. But of this Gilbert Hurst, who had brought Irion and his sister down to Rockford, had allowed no doubt. He had known Lewis for ten years intimately; what more could they require? Lewis was rich, and of good report; a little peculiar perhaps, and a recluse. But if Irion had no objection to his 'moods,' who else should heed them?

'His family?' they asked, with good old county pride. 'Family! oh, in all probability he had no family—no one in Australia *had* any family,' Hurst asserted confidently, adding that 'in a new country a man was what he made of himself; what his present state, and his position, and his talent made of him. It was no use asking of ancestors. If Lewis had any, they were dead or scattered. Gilbert had never seen any relations, objectionable or creditable.

All this was not satisfactory; they were Floyds, and they did not approve the lack of family. But still less did they approve the idea of having Irion, as well as Eleanor, a spinster on their hands. They were wise

enough to know that in these days a girl's chances of marriage are not greater because she can boast a family, and poverty, in the same breath.

Besides, Irion was self-willed, and not to be compelled. She had not even asked their permission to be Lewis's wife; she only said, 'I am going to marry him.' Therefore, they, being wise in their generation, had decided to agree with her, if possible. Agreement with Irion was not always an easy matter; she had been rather a jarring element at home. Her opinions were too advanced for their understanding or approval. She *would* ask for whys and wherefores. She refused to see things as they showed them to her, choosing rather to discover for herself, or try to discover. This according to them was worse, since she could never hope to succeed, but would be for ever stumbling amongst pit-falls, and dragging other people down with her. No, Irion was not a favourite at home. There was no open warfare, but there was a consciousness of apartness. She knew it, and they knew it,

and altogether marriage might be well for her. They would like Claud Lewis if possible.

So in the days which passed before his coming, Irion showed Naomi all the beauties of the country round and about Rockford. There was the village of Aylmer under the hill, and the estates of Aylmer stretching away over it, and the romance of Aylmer hanging like a cloud about it. There was the old castellated house, and the old oak forest; all empty of sound and movement, save for the rushing of the river, as it dashed over its rocky bed, and the cry of the night-jar across the plain.

'And does no one live there now?' asked Naomi, lazily interested, leaning against the window-sill of Irion's room, and looking out over Aylmer as the evening mists hung about it, and the sunset lights set it in a blaze of red and golden brightness.

'No one; the house is falling into decay, they say, and the grounds are like the grounds of the palace of the Sleeping Beauty—an impenetrable mass of tangled thorn hedges.'

'Can one get to the house? I should like

to take a moonlight wander round its forsaken terraces. It would be as good as a ghost story, quite a new sensation. Let us try it.'

'I would not go there for anything,' Irion said; not affectedly, after the manner of would-be sentimental girlhood, but decidedly, as a question already self-asked and self-answered.

'Not go there! why? You surely don't believe in restless spirits of murderers wandering over the scene of their crime! Don't say you do now, or I shall lose the last atom of respect for you. One of the things with which I have no patience is morbid sentiment. You are putting on a tragedy queen expression of nose already, you little fool!'

This remark was made perfectly quietly, perfectly good-naturedly, and Irion could almost have echoed it in self-reproach. She felt that in very truth she was growing paler and colder, because of certain pictures which the mere suggestion of visiting Aylmer had called up in her memory. A child's first exaggerated picture of crime—of blood and murder. Pictures of love and death, drawn by the marvel-loving hands of servants and

village cronies. Pictures looked at with a child's delight in horrors incomprehensible; pictures dreamed about — remembered, as nothing of later years was remembered by her.

'I believe,' Naomi went on, 'you would expect the ghost of what's-his-name Aylmer——'

'Ulric.'

'Ulric Aylmer, to come and carry you off as his bride *à la* "fair Imogene." If you had been older at the time, I should have said that the sight of our infantine and handsome —was he handsome?'

'No.'

'Never mind, he must be—handsome murderer—in long clothes—had called upon you for pity, and that the cry was even now echoing in your ears; or that the wan, pale face had aroused the first feelings of love in your youthful heart. But as you were only five years old at the time of the interesting event, perhaps, it is not very probable.'

'How much more nonsense are you going to spin out before falling asleep over the exertion? I tell you seriously though, and

you may laugh at me as much as you like, that the sight of Ulric Aylmer as he passed down the village street, after his committal by the magistrates, and the feeling of his touch as he laid his hand on my head, and remarked, "'What a pretty child,"' with infinite scorn, '*did* impress me as nothing has done before or since. I actually imagined his hand blood-stained, and fancied I could see the marks on my hair for weeks afterwards. A feeling of horror came upon me which I shall never lose, which returns to this day if the name of Ulric Aylmer be spoken before me. Oh! you may sneer, but he *is* the bogey of my life; and if he stood near me to-morrow, and if I knew it was he—as I believe I should instinctively—I should shriek, or faint, or do something of which I have never been guilty in my life.'

'And why?' superciliously.

'Because of the association of his person with the word *murder*, which even now (perhaps from my early knowledge of its meaning) seems to me the one unpardonable crime; the one debasing of our natures for which there can be no mercy in heaven or on earth.'

'There may be extenuating circumstances.'

'Let us hope there are—before heaven. I was only speaking personally. I could never find it in my heart to pity or pardon a shedder of human blood—a Cain! And this Aylmer murder was so cold-blooded, so deliberate. An honest young peasant knocked down in the prime of life, murdered before the very eyes of the girl he loved, because, forsooth, a so-called *gentleman*, had chosen to claim her for his own. Aylmer might have fought him fair, if fight they must. Aylmer was a coward as well as a murderer.'

As Irion spoke this condemnation, there came over her an expression of the most unutterable scorn and horror. She turned away so that Naomi should not see her face, and tore the faded blossom off a creeper, which was peeping in at the window.

In part she was ashamed of her intolerance. She knew herself wanting in human charity, or some other kindly human weakness which makes us see a possible heaven for others besides ourselves. Yet she could not conquer her prejudice. To look on bloodshed were to

set mercy outside the door for ever—so far as she might be concerned in rendering it.

So she thought, looking over the woods of Aylmer. And we all fancy that we know ourselves.

Naomi was tired of the subject. There was nothing new in it after all. Passion, and jealousy, and murder—all the old, old story. No doubt Ulric Aylmer was a very nice man now, highly respectable, a preacher and a practiser of well-dressed morality; a demonstrator of the cleansing power of gold over all impurities. 'No doubt there are plenty more murderers about,' Naomi said; 'it is all a part of life as we find it. We must not be over-critical, or we forfeit our own peace.' Peace, and comfort, and self-satisfaction, are the *desiderata* of life. Let us rest.

Yes, let us rest. Why allow the shortcomings of strangers to disturb us? Let us sleep. Why awake for a cry of 'Help!' from a street-corner? We who are well-dressed, why should we soil our clothes by trying to pick silver out of the mud; especially when somebody else has let it fall there?

It is not fashionable to stoop.

Then the two girls went down to the family tea. They had tea at Rockford!—good, old-fashioned tea! Not the modern five o'clock delusion, but tea, in very substance. 'Dinner at one o'clock!' Naomi wrote to Mrs. Betrix. 'Schools and classes and district visiting. *Tea* at six; work and reading aloud and family conviviality! Bed at ten; healthy sleep, pleasant dreams, and eight o'clock breakfast to follow!' But Naomi liked it nevertheless—for a time—it was a change. 'I feel quite pastoral,' she wrote, 'and think of becoming a shepherdess of Watteau simplicity.'

And the Floyds seeing Naomi dressed in sober 'country' clothes, and quiet with a sleepy contented quietness; seeing her eat and drink and sleep without the post-mark of city upon her, were willing to grant that after all it might be possible some good should come out of London—even in the shape of young-womanhood. 'Miss Hurst is actually quieter than Irion,' they all said, 'quite a good example for her. Irion

had at least shown good sense in choosing her friend. Irion was disposed to be flighty, but Miss Hurst—why Miss Hurst had only been at the house a few days, and already she was interesting herself in parish matters! She had gone with Eleanor to a Dorcas meeting—with Mrs. Floyd to a mother's clothing society—with John Floyd to a mission meeting. She had poured out tea at a charity-school *fête*, and shown her good sense generally.'

But then they did not see the letters Naomi wrote home afterwards!

Naomi possessed a fund of quiet wit, which was given to disport itself in letter-writing. Letters from Rockford were welcome as the presence of the court fool at the dining-tables of Park Place. Merry jests they were, at the expense of well-intentioned country ignorance, or innocence, 'call it which you will,' she wrote, 'the result is the same—an enviable self-complacency.'

But Irion was, as her family said, 'worse than ever' now that love had disturbed her life. She was more 'restless,' more 'unbalanced.' It

was well she would be married soon, only they almost despaired of her ever 'settling down.' It was strange, with the example of Eleanor before her—Eleanor, who in all things was a 'Floyd' after the family model of generations —a woman with all womanly virtues, and a Christian; a friend of the lowly and meek of heart.

But Eleanor's virtues were self-evident.

CHAPTER XII.

THESE are not the days of mystery.

Claud Lewis and Ulric Aylmer were one and the same man—only he tried to imagine it was not so. He thought by changing his name and changing his country, to change his own identity. And in a measure it had succeeded—until now.

To-day, were it possible to him, he would —because he could not forget—have cast aside love and hope, and plunged again under the waters of that modern Lethe which had before served to dull his consciousness of personality. But it was not possible. Human hearts will cry aloud for mercy. And human love is hard to kill. He had believed it dead once, and buried. But behold a clod of earth had been rolled from the surface by a

passer-by, and under it lay the living moving thing, beautiful still to look upon, and warm with a fresh young life. And see! he had taken up the body, of his own free-will, and hugged it to his lips. He could not cast it from him now, he could not force back all its loveliness into the cold unwholesome earth. He was a man, and beyond a man's possible it were not his to reach.

So he was travelling to Aylmer.

Twenty years since he had set foot on his own! Twenty years since curse-followed he had turned from the place a self-made exile—for ever—as he had believed. How poor is human calculation! To-day he loved. To-day, for that love's sake, he was coming back; chancing recognition, chancing a fall greater even than the first, for deceit and dishonour would be laid to his charge now, with the rest.

But he might pass through the ordeal, and passing safely might turn his back for ever upon the old life. With Irion to stand by him, with Irion to love him, and loving, to hold him up, what might not life have of worth for him still? Worth for him and

honour for her through him, and happiness —long-coveted happiness for both.

'She can have no association with the name of Aylmer,' he told himself, lying back in the railway-carriage, and gazing, a stranger, over the country. 'She was a little girl, and long before she grew up people must have ceased to talk of me. When we are away in the new country—when I shall have *proved* her love and mine, I will tell her of my name and station. *But she shall never know the rest.* Do we pour poison down the throat of a healthy child to see whether it will kill it? Do we pluck a flower, and cast it upon a dung-heap to see whether it will withstand the soiling? Other people may do it for us, but then the cruelty is not ours, and we by our tenderness can make amends. Besides, if they come to my wife, and unveil me before her, and if she question of my crime, the law will answer her—"*Not Guilty.*"'

Again he laughed aloud, sitting alone in the railway-carriage, the unnatural laugh of an unreal merriment, a would-be gibe at all truth and all uprightness.

The story of his life.

Twice he must appear in Aylmer; to-day passing through it on his way to Rockford (Aylmer and Rockford lay side by side), and once again for their marriage in Aylmer Church. After all, it was only a few hours more of torture for him, and if he should escape unconfessed, the reward were worth the Inquisition.

'After all,' he said, 'the chances are in my favour. Have I not Gilbert Hurst as a surety for my nationality?' another laugh, but this time suddenly stopped. The form of Irion rose up before him; brave Irion, who for love of him was going to make of him what he had never made of himself—a man worthy of himself; worthy of the talents which God had given him; worthy of the strength which it was his to use at will. Hitherto he had not willed. To-morrow he would, or to-day, perhaps—to-day if all went well with him at Rockford.

And so he arrived, and Irion met him at the station, and they walked home together, right through Aylmer village from end to end.

The villagers turned to stare at him, for they knew that 'Miss Irion's young man' was coming to Rockford that day — country people have a way of knowing; and they stood at their doors to watch for the bridegroom elect. They only remarked that 'he wasn't much of it to look on,' that 'it was lucky he'd got some money, for sure he hadn't got nothing else to boast on.' Yet they looked at him again and again till he was out of sight. Even then their thoughts followed him, and they felt, without knowing what they felt, that the man had a strong personality; a power over other men, which compelled their interest. And the women felt it, for they said one to the other: 'Well, this 'ere Mr. Lewis, he ain't 'ansome—no, he ain't, but he's the sort I'd have for a lover, for all that.'

No one suspected him—why should they? What was there in an Australian of to-day —a man with friends and money, a visitor from the great city—to suggest the Ulric Aylmer of twenty years ago? The fair-haired, blue-eyed stripling; the soft-handed

murderer of Betty Smith's swain, the ruiner of poor Betty herself, who put an end to her own life because of him. Poor frightened Betty, who would not even give evidence lest she should hang her high-born lover; Betty, who played at hide-and-seek so cleverly with the lawyers, and escaped them at last by a self-purchased death. Everybody remembered pretty Betty as she was when they were all children together.

And having walked boldly through the village side by side with Irion, Claud Lewis felt confident of success. Not a face that he knew, not one amongst the crowd. But the *place* was not changed. It might have been yesterday that he stood there, a velvet-dressed, golden-curled boy, side by side with the white Arab pony. Yesterday, that he had stood there again, face to face with his accusers and his judges. Yesterday, that 'Not guilty,' he returned to his home, to find the people cursing him, and refusing to see him innocent. Yesterday, that he had stolen away at midnight, afraid of them all, and passed from amongst them

for ever. The very stones seemed familiar to him, and the broken twigs on the road. Only the people were strangers. They were the children of his boyhood, these mothers and fathers of to-day. By them he knew of the change which must be in himself—he had not recognised it before. We only know of the passage of time by the mark it makes on others. We cannot feel ourselves changing. If we were blind and deaf we should be always young to our own thinking. Seeing, we look on others, and are conscience stricken.

Irion, walking with Claud Lewis up the last hill to Rockford, thought it well to give him a little friendly advice, lest unknowingly he should offend against the prejudices of her family.

'We country people are somewhat—well—conventional, you know,' she said, laughing; 'we can't stand having our pet prejudices rubbed the wrong way. You will have to wear the clothes which we give you to wear, and try to look comfortable in them! New fashions are not accepted at Rockford.'

'Are you afraid that I shall shock your family; knowing so little of the ways of an English gentleman?' he asked, bitterly.

'English or Australian, a gentleman is a gentleman. I am not afraid for you on that score, Claud, or I had never loved you,' she said, with honest eyes looking straight into his.

'What then?'

'Well! if you go plunging into future states, or destinies, or any of your favourite expanded ideas!'

'No fear, Irion, I only talk to people who can understand me.'

He spoke low and tenderly, bending over her. To her he so often questioned of these things, allowing his mind to warm itself in the sunshine of her sympathy. She did not agree with him, scarcely on one single point. But she understood him.

'And Bimboo — why did you not bring Bimboo?' she asked, for the first time taking note of the absence of the dog. She had never seen Lewis without it before.

'I shall only be here for so few hours, that

I persuaded him to accept Hurst's company for the time.'

'So few hours! But you will stay the night? My mother has prepared your room.'

'No, I shall return by the night mail to London.'

'And when do we meet again?' very sadly.

'That depends upon yourself. If you return to London with Naomi Hurst next week—*then*—— If not, on our wedding-day, dear one.'

She flushed, and turned away from him, his voice was so low and passion-moved; it told her more of love here on the public road than the warmest kisses of another given and taken in secret.

'And you will not come to Rockford again?' she asked, trying to speak naturally and to hide her disappointment. 'I cannot go back to London. There is a great deal to be done; you see we poor people have everything to do for ourselves—you have given us little enough time to do it in.'

'Do your parents insist upon a heathen

ceremony, a savage war-shout of triumph over your sacrifice?'

'Did you not say you wished it otherwise?' very tenderly.

'I suppose we always wish the things that are sacred to us hidden from gross eyes and vulgar tongues, Irion.'

'And being so, you can wonder whether I would deliberately pain you?'

'Not you, my own—your parents. I cannot expect them to love me, and only love will fill the place of forms and ceremonies.'

'Don't be shocked,' she answered, jokingly, 'but I have not asked their opinion. I said our wedding was going to be an absolutely private one; that only themselves should come with us to the church, and that there should be no feasting afterwards, and *I shall have it so.* By-the-bye—to change the subject—I wonder how you will like Eleanor and John. There's not much family likeness between us morally. I am quite the black sheep of the family.'

'Are you? Well, there are so many white ones about that one rather likes the change.

The contrast between us two will be less striking, Irion.'

And then they drifted into a discussion of the Floyd family generally, Irion showing him their various weaknesses. She wished him to find favour with them, but feared they stood too far apart. His world was a new world; his people new people; his thoughts new thoughts. And Rockford was so old!

Old? yes—but because of the very oldness of the place he, when he arrived, was welcomed with old-world heartiness—as if his coming were indeed a pleasure to them. They brought him of their best to eat and drink, with old-fashioned hospitality. They sent the servant hither and thither to fetch and carry for him, themselves taking a part. And Naomi Hurst looking on smiled pityingly to see the 'fuss' over a stranger.

After dinner John Floyd took Lewis to see the kitchen-garden, and Eleanor showed him her poultry. Old Colonel Floyd dragged him over miles of country to admire wheat crops and mangold-wurzel, Alderney cows

and Berkshire swine. But this was their all. They had nothing better to offer him. They wanted nothing better, they were happy in their innocence.

The party travelled out in a gang, Naomi going with them. She was curious to see how 'the aborigine would stand it.' But Irion stayed at home. It was necessary perhaps that Claud should make a martyr of himself for her sake, but she need not be there to see. Besides, she felt sure he would do it with such a very bad grace; it would probably be a failure after all. Claud was not wont to bend himself for the satisfaction of men—and poplars were always cut down at Rockford.

Somehow he got through the walk, and they all came home, and there had not been open warfare. Afterwards, in the evening, he was closeted for an hour with old Colonel Floyd—and then it was over—this first visit to Rockford.

Irion walked back with him to the station.

'Are you satisfied?' she asked him presentl, yreaking a long silence.

He had one of his 'moods' upon him, and scarcely spoke to her, but held her hand tightly in his as they walked along. It was dark, and no person could see them to gibe at them; if any passed. But the roads were deserted now.

The ghosts of other days were haunting him, even to the exclusion of Irion and her love. Another voice rang in his ear when she spoke to him so softly here on the high road; a voice which had been tender too—once. It had changed, and he had forgotten it—until to-night.

'Are you satisfied?' Irion repeated. 'Were they kind to you?'

'Kind, dear?' he answered, satirically; 'yes, they were *kind* enough. They did not horsewhip me, you see.'

'Did you expect it of them, even figuratively?'

'If they had followed the example of other people, they might have done so.'

'We are just, in Rockford, if narrow. We do not condemn a man till we see something in him to condemn. Besides, I have not told

them what you said to me about your early life, therefore they have no reason to echo the cry of your old enemies; and for myself, "*Let the dead past bury its dead*" was always my motto.'

She spoke lightly, but she felt him start and drop her hand, then suddenly grasp it again tighter than before, wringing it almost to pain.

Irion often wondered why this past folly of his, whatever its nature, sat so heavy upon him that the mention of it was as a whip-lash across his face? But she answered herself that inasmuch as he was more sensitive than other men, more deep and passionate of nature, his shortcomings would be as defects to his own thinking, and his follies crimes. He would fain stand well in the sight of men, but knowing men were stiff-necked and hard to persuade, he had turned away in his pride and refused them the satisfaction they might have demanded for his offence.

'But it will be different when we are married,' she told herself; 'I will give him the confidence he lacks. His future shall be

atonement in full for any past. He is gifted beyond all men I have ever known, and his talents shall ensure his greatness.'

This she thought whilst he was still silent, repeating to himself, like the clang of a dirge : '*Let the dead past bury its dead.*'

Aye ! if it would—if it would !

So Irion had not much pleasure from her walk back to the station with him. She had hoped to talk of many things, and plan many things. But she found him absolutely irresponsive. He did not seem to be conscious of her presence. She was not pained, knowing him now, and loving him as he was. She had not made a hero of him, even in her own imagination, but she refused to believe him the purposeless creature he would sometimes make of himself when his 'moods' were upon him.

Thank God ! she had seen him otherwise.

CHAPTER XIII.

IRION walked home alone in the darkness after having seen Claud Lewis carried away in the train. Her thoughts ran riot, as thoughts will when we would rather rest.

'What a strange man this is I have chosen to take for my own,' they said to her. 'How far beyond, and yet how far behind, other men! A God of Nature's making—a devil of his own—and what of mine when I shall handle him? The task will be a difficult one, and my longing for a destiny satisfied.'

And Irion was right. There is nothing greater in all the world than to have the making of another life. And truly this is woman's work? From the beginning was it not given us to do? Who then shall tell

us that our part in the world's destiny is a small one, or unworthy?

So at last Irion was satisfied.

It was no light or meaningless task she had undertaken. She knew the man full of faults, full of weaknesses—full of strength—a strength which but increased his weakness, because of its powerlessness to overcome. A mental strength swamped by physical unwholesomeness: good seed choked by the thorns and thistles of affected cynicism—so Irion thought it—not understanding.

But she loved him. Were his faults a thousandfold greater, were his virtues a thousandfold less, she loved him with a love which was all sufficient and all sustaining in its truthfulness. She had faith in his love too, believing it stronger than her own, inasmuch as a man's nature is always stronger than a woman's and his above all other.

When she reached home her family, gathered round the supper-table, questioned her with well-meaning obtrusiveness.

'Where have you been, Irion, so late?' Mrs. Floyd asked, coldly.

'I walked to the station with Claud, mother.'

'When I was young, girls were content to see their lover's faces by daylight.'

'You should have asked your mother's permission before going out, Irion,' added Colonel Floyd, looking up over the wall of his *Field*, —'the County Squire's Bible,' as impious Naomi called it, writing to her sister.

'But Claud wished me to go, father. He naturally wanted half an hour alone with me —the last before our wedding day. Mother would have forbidden it, had I asked her; her ideas and mine being so widely different on these subjects. And since I must have disobeyed her in favour of Claud's authority over me, I thought it better not to raise the question.'

'Is this *London* morality, Miss Hurst?' asked Mrs. Floyd, meekly, addressing Naomi.

She believed that all shortcomings in a Floyd must be attributable to some evil outer influence, and not to natural or family imperfection

'I am afraid it is,' Naomi answered, seeing

her way to protect Irion without much trouble to herself. 'You see, we who live in crowds are judged in the aggregate. We may walk where we like, so long as we take care not to tread on the toes of some one who is strong enough to turn again and rend us. We may be as wicked as we like for our own amusement, so long as we are cunning enough to keep the little black devils of our peccadilloes from sticking pins into the thin skins of our well-dressed neighbours. Yes, Mrs. Floyd, I am afraid we Londoners *are* in a state of moral decadence. But who's to save us? Can I, can you—can Irion—by denying herself the pleasure! of a walk through six inches of mud at 9 p.m. in a drizzling rain?'

'My dear Miss Hurst, how satirical you are! If we were to judge you by your talk, you know, we should believe you as bad as the rest of them. Luckily your actions prove you a self-traducer.'

'I don't think people ought even to say what they don't mean, Miss Hurst,' John Floyd reproved, looking up from his writing.

He was the working curate of Aylmer, and it was his calling to preach.

'I mean it strictly. Can you deny the moral smokiness of London? But can you alter it?'

'I would do my best in the matter of cleansing, were London the vineyard which I had been called to husband.'

'Thank your stars that it's not.'

'On the contrary, Miss Hurst, the harder the task the greater the reward for performing it. I should deem myself blessed to be thought worthy of such a calling.'

'Your virtues will discover you sooner or later, be sure,' Naomi said. And he took her at her word.

But all this time Naomi had been kicking Irion's feet under the table, trying to make her see that the present was a good opportunity to escape, and so avoid the end of the lecture which Naomi had so cleverly drawn upon herself. She *didn't* care and Irion *did* care, and it was rather amusing to astonish them for once. The argument grew warm and serious between her and John Floyd. There was no fear of its coming to a quarrel. Naomi was far too good-tempered to quarrel

with any one. And anger was against the curate's principles. But Naomi put him to utter confusion; and Irion, having listened amused, only just saw the opening for escape which Naomi had made for her in time to use it. She left the room just as her brother was saying:

'You are a very clever sophist, Miss Hurst, and can, I see, take any side of a question. As my mother remarked, it is well we have known you for a week before this evening. I suppose Londoners must act sometimes; it must be almost impossible to be quite honest under the pressure of social unreality. But we country people are not deceived by a little masquerading,' with infinite self-complacency.

'No; you are only self-deluded,' Naomi thought, but she did not say so. Irion was out of the way now, and the discussion might end. It was getting fatiguing.

'The fact is,' Naomi wrote to Mrs. Betrix that evening, 'dear Johnny thinks me an angel—*he wants to think so, you see.* He is possessed with the idea that I should be the

very person to regulate charity schools, feed paupers on Sunday, and make pinafores and comforters for infantine clod-hoppers! Like all good people, our dear Johnny sees things in the light of his own principle, and his principle is conformable to his wish; his wish being to make Naomi Hurst Mrs. Johnny Floyd! He told me so the other evening. But when I gently remonstrated, he begged me to forget that he had ever spoken; "he didn't mean it," he said in his confusion, with more honesty than politeness. I was delighted; it was quite a new form of offer. Poor Johnny! The other one, Eleanor, is very *nice*, but there's no change to be got out of her in the way of amusement.'

Irion did not come down to family prayers that evening. It seemed to her that earthly love, and cares for an earthly destiny, were not much akin to heavenly things. There was an incongruity in setting them side by side; incongruity was to Irion actual pain, and pain was by Irion avoided. In truth, she was an epicurean of the days when philosophy had not yet dwindled into

licence, and happiness did not mean pollution.

But Naomi knelt down with the rest, and prayed with her lips, and gained her reward.

'How good she is,' they said of her. 'How meek and lowly of spirit; she who can come out of the glamour of her London home, and kneeling amongst us simple country-folk, can worship God in singleness of heart.' Not one of them said of her: 'How clever an actress is Naomi Hurst! How wise in her generation!'

In these days Irion did little else than work, making her wedding clothes. And Eleanor helped her. Eleanor was kind and gentle always, and in every way a model for Irion; only Irion would say that she had been cast in a different mould, a less perfect one, and that now, when the clay had got shapen and hardened with all its imperfections, it was not possible to force it into the mould out of which Eleanor had been taken in all her perfectness. It was no good trying.

Naomi sat and looked on at them both, wondering and satirizing; half-wishing some-

times that it could be possible to her to feel so great an interest in such small matters as economies and durabilities, and calicoes and woollens, which seemed the fabrics of Irion's life just now. They were all-sufficing, and Naomi almost envied this well-seeming poverty, which brought with it the necessity to work, to labour for self-respect, and for the respect of other men.

These were things not to be bought at Aylmer; they were rewards given in just proportion to merit. Prizes they were for a life's proven worthiness, but never—never at Aylmer the homage of craven grovellers for patronage at the feet of well-dressed vice and gilded ignorance. They were a proud people, if poor; and a pure of heart, if narrow—and amongst them Irion had been born and reared.

She had her prejudices—what Floyd had not?—and these prejudices were deep-rooted; bone of her bone, flesh of her flesh, or she had found more mercy in her heart for the young Squire of Aylmer, who had fallen so low, and paid the price. He who was to her

only a God-forsaken, man-forsaken wretch, Cain-branded, and well deserving of his punishment.

But she had ceased to think of him now, even gazing out of her window as of old. New people filled her life, and new things. Work in hand, and love in heart, she only dreamed dreams of a new life in a new country, side by side with Claud Lewis. Of high desires rising from the ground on which *he* stood, and soaring heavenwards. Of love like a halo glowing about him—her love—her wifely love, which should lead him out of the valley of the shadow of death and set him upon the hill-top. She dreamed of fame for him and greatness, and the honour of men.

'He can conquer,' she said, 'and he shall, despite the follies of his youth, whatever their kind. It is not mine to question, but mine to heal and to change.'

Even the prospect of living alone with him in a strange country did not frighten Irion, so strong was her love. She was neither foolish nor romance-blinded, as some girls; she did

not fancy life would be all brightness because she had found a husband, but she did not dread the pain. Perhaps she looked for more trouble than might be her due, knowing the man. But what would it profit her to do well in this life if nothing stood up to oppose her? There were little enough glory in wearing a laurel-crown for honours won without a fight. It is not so that contentment comes to us when our day is far spent and the night drawing on apace—that last night in which no man can work; when the sum of his life's calling is to be reckoned up, and himself bidden to answer for its deficiency.

These things were mysteries to Irion as yet—only the substance of them floated like cloud shadows over the field of her brain, while her hands worked so industriously about the common things of life; while she sat looking out over the woods of Aylmer, rich with a wealth of summer greenness. They were not terrible to her now. Light of spirit, and gay of heart, she found that even the deserted house looked less ghostly than of yore. For the sun shone on its windows

till they sparkled despite the dust, and the pigeons were not afraid to sit cooing on the roof. She might even have found it in her heart, at this time, to pity the outcast owner of those broad lands, knowing him far enough away from her or hers, and unlikely ever to disgust her with his presence.

We have no objection even to murder, if it stands afar off; but most of us would recoil if the blood fell upon our very garments.

Irion remembered the touch of the murderer's hand as he had laid it upon her head, passing by her on the village highway.

Twenty years ago!

CHAPTER XIV.

THERE had been a lecture at the Aylmer Charity School, a lecture on School Boards, and the evils of the system present and future. Everybody had attended the lecture, for everybody felt strongly on the subject—everybody except Naomi, who only went to see 'how far country ideas could stretch themselves under pressure, they, as a rule, being not over elastic.' To do the lecturer justice, he did talk sense—if what he said were weighed and measured strictly by his own scale, and Naomi, screwing herself down to prove it by that standard, found much to admire in the enthusiasm and firm conviction of the speaker. He evidently *felt* what he said, and Naomi's world did not feel much, she knew. She could at least admire—afar

off—this country earnestness of purpose. Naomi was not narrow-minded. She could allow two sides to every question—but then it was the fashion.

They were walking home by twos and threes, straggling over the road; friends, relations, neighbours, all earnest over the affairs of the others. Naomi and John Floyd were the last of the line—far behind the rest. Naomi never moved quickly. John did generally—it was his calling. But he had forgotten his calling just now—or else his calling was to be kind to the stranger within his gate. That part of it he performed as conscientiously as the rest.

Naomi was talking about the lecture, or trying to. He was trying to change the subject.

'I had not given you country people credit for so much soundness,' she was saying. 'Now, where does a man like that pick up his facts?'

'We can read—books travel even to Rockford, Miss Hurst.'

'And you have faith in what is written?'

'It depends upon the writer. We judge a

man by his deeds, and a woman also, otherwise we should be misled occasionally, as in the case of some one we "know,"' with an excess of tenderness in his tone—'butteriness,' Naomi called it. Then, as she made no answer, 'When you are older, Miss Hurst, and have learnt the fallacy of making yourself out worse than you are, you will be a perfect woman.'

Naomi supposed this was meant for flattery.

'Do you believe that much-to-be-desired day will ever come?' she asked.

'I am sure it will. God does not forsake His own.'

'I am only talking of men—*men do.* When I am "older," as you remark, no one will trouble himself about my perfections or imperfections.'

'No Londoner, perhaps.'

'Happily we are all so wicked, we don't see each other's failings.'

'Why happily? You did not talk like this when you first came here. But I know why you are doing it.'

'I wish I knew a why and a wherefore for all I say and do—I or others.'

'You think,' unheeding, 'that you will cure me of loving you. You think that you will shock me out of wishing to make you my wife. I read you, you see, with infinite self-satisfaction.'

'I don't want to be rude; but, I am afraid, you read through tinted spectacles of your own choosing.'

'I read through the medium of Christian charity, if that is what you mean.'

'I am an object of charity, am I?'

'Are we not all? Only some of us are unworthy. But I do not wish to speak in parables now. I wish to ask you, once again, will you be my wife, my helpmate in God's vineyard—will you?' he pleaded, with very human warmth.

'My answer was given you before, also the consequence of your repeating this.'

'I have forgotten. I have purposely forgotten.'

'You drive me from amongst you. I shall go home to-morrow.'

'And I shall follow you. We servants of the Church learn from the beginning to persist—to hope—to pray—believing that our prayers will be answered.'

'Well for you that they are not—if you would take such a one as I to help in your labours—unless you are going on the principle of making friends of the mammon of unrighteousness.'

'I do not like the Scriptures hacked in pieces; neither time nor place will allow me to defend them. Again you are trying to shock me. Leave it off. It is no good. Yesterday I was nervous in speaking to you—to-day I am not. I love you, and my love is pure and holy, as befits my calling. I would make you my wife, because of what I have seen of your natural goodness and righteousness of heart.'

'And you do not ask whether I love you?'

'I do not; you can learn that—if you will.'

'And if I will not?'

'Then I will try and make you—and trying, I shall presently succeed.'

'Never. I repeat (not that I like repeat-

ing, and I wish you had spared me the trouble) I can never be your wife; never any clergyman's wife; never any religious man's wife. Your faith and mine are as far apart as our mutual homes—as different. You would hate me in six months, and I you in one. Let us remain friends.'

'You act your part well, but I do not despair. I will leave off importuning you for a while—since you say it "*troubles*" you. I shall importune a higher Power on your behalf. You were created to do good work amongst us, and you cannot rebel against your destiny. Forget what I have said, if it has displeased you, and come with me and Eleanor to the "mission" tea to-morrow. You will hear Dr. Reymond speak. He will show you what men can do—by the help of God, what strength is in us.'

'No, I shall go home to-morrow.'

'Not on my account. Can you not forget that I have "*troubled*" you? Can you not stay with us?' he pleaded, with all the earnestness that was in him.

But Naomi had decided that for his sake

she ought to go. It was very pleasant here at Rockford, and she would like to have stayed to see Irion 'disposed of.' But she had been brought up amongst conventionalities, and conventionalities told her to remove herself from the man she had refused, lest some day he should tax her with having encouraged him to hope.

'Why do men always propose just at the wrong moment?' she said to herself; 'he might have waited till after Irion's marriage.'

But the subject was dropped. For the rest of the walk home John Floyd's conversation consisted of melancholy-toned monosyllabic answers to questions from Naomi, which were intended to be lively, if he would only see them so. When Vere Penrose got a despairing mood, Naomi always 'brought him round' with chaff; but she did not find the country parson so easy to 'manage,' or she did not understand him as well. Anyhow, her attempts to 'get over' his melancholy failed utterly, and the end of the walk was in 'green and yellow silence,' as she said to Irion that evening, when she told her what had passed, giving

her reasons for going back to London on the morrow.

Irion had seen it all from the first day of Naomi's coming amongst them. Irion was sorry for John. John was very earnest in all he did; he had never tried loving before, therefore it might come upon him with greater force. Irion would not persuade Naomi to stay; it was right that she should be out of John's sight, if not out of his mind just yet. And indeed, Naomi knew it to be so herself. John Floyd was not at all like Vere Penrose, and she did not think it safe to 'humbug' with him: his very calling taught him earnestness.

And that was the end of Naomi's visit to Rockford.

The end before a new beginning.

CHAPTER XV.

AND the wedding-day came round, and nothing rose up between Irion and Claud Lewis to set them apart. Nobody came forward to save them: nobody knew.

They were married in Aylmer Church by the Rector of Aylmer, a young man and a stranger to any past. No guests had been invited, yet the church was full. Village lads and lasses had crowded to see 'Miss Irion' married, thinking it, nevertheless, an offence against them that she had given them so little to see; but she was a favourite amongst them, and they forgave her. 'It was his fault, no doubt; he looked a close sort o' chap.'

So the village children came to strew flowers before her. She had so often stopped on her way to romp with them across the village

green. She had sat by them when they were ill, and told them such wonderful stories of princes and fairies, and beautiful enchanted gardens. Such different stories to those Miss Floyd read them out of small paper-covered books, which were 'not even pretty to look at.' Miss Irion gave them extra lumps of cake at the school fêtes, and knobs of sugar to pocket on the sly. Miss Irion often begged them off when Dame Marjory would punish them for making noises in school. Yes; 'Miss Irion' was the children's friend, and the children would honour her with their gifts and garlands now she was going away from them.

And in the church there were also young girls who had, in the days of their sorrow, poured their griefs, and their fears, and their losses into Irion's ear, and who had, through her tender mercy, been led safely through at last. These also knelt down and prayed for her happiness, prayed with all the strength of their young souls, prayed for the woman who had been to them an angel of mercy—a saviour.

And no one knew but themselves and the God they implored.

Only the righteous and the self-respecting told their griefs to Eleanor Floyd; but to Irion came the sinners and the forsaken. Eleanor was just, but Irion was merciful. And human nature is more in need of mercy than justice.

But the old stayed at home. They were weary of marryings and givings in marriage, and a bride more or less was nothing to them now, their mission being long ago fulfilled.

So Ulric Aylmer, standing amongst his own people, saw nothing but strangers around him. He searched them all keenly as he walked up the aisle of the church. He did not recall one face amongst the crowd.

He was pale and stern, and his lips were firm set, but he did not hesitate or fear. He was a strong man, and he had told himself, 'I will do this thing;' and now, had they shouted 'Murderer!' at him in the midst of the service, he had gone through with it to the end, nor cowered down before them, unless, unless

Irion's voice had echoed the cry, and then—God help him! there would be no more strength in him.

Irion was not in bridal dress. He had said to her once that wedding shows were an abomination to him. At best a vulgar pandering to unwholesome sentiment, a desecration of all truth and purity: mummeries which bring down holy love to the level of a stage burlesque. After that it never occurred to Irion to have 'a wedding,' although, long ago, she had, with other girls of her age, drawn fancy pictures of orange-blossoms and bridesmaids, and county honour. She was a Floyd, and the Floyds were a great people (in their own estimation), the greater for having nothing left them but their name. A hundred years ago the Floyds of Rockford were rich and powerful.

We always give extra honour to what has gone from us for ever.

But now Irion was married. She was not a Floyd any longer; she had merged herself in the man she had chosen. In blind faith she saw him sign his name in the registry-

book—that name which was neither his nor hers—the false name which, if cavilled over in days to come, might prove her no wife of Ulric Aylmer. And he? Had he seen his deed in this light, had he acknowledged a second wrong which he was doing the woman he loved? or could he believe in that love, and still go on with this thing? Yes. He was *certain* of his love. He never doubted that he would bring to her all the happiness she could ask or require of him—all the satisfaction. He had need to be saved. He saw the strong rock before him, and he intended to reach it at all costs.

'The end justifies the means,' he said, 'and I am strong enough to protect her afterwards. She loves me; I shall always be guiltless in her sight. Let the world jeer on; I can at least buy its toleration if she wishes. For her sake I would stoop even so low in my own eyes—which hitherto I have refused—being alone.'

And reasoning as the sophists reasoned, tortuously, Ulric Aylmer led Irion away from her home and from her people, and gloried in

his possession—the more so since he had tossed the die with fate, and for the moment come off victor. No one in Aylmer had known him, and now—now the new life was begun. What matter if after Irion had proved him she should learn from others that he was not always stainless? For her would be the triumph of having won him over to greatness, for great he would be, now that the evil hour had passed by.

There was nothing new in the wedding ceremony—nothing new in the partings after it. Tears, and smiles, and good wishes, and confusion. That was all the world knew except that Irion was beautiful beyond all common beauty, for the halo of a great happiness lay around and about her. She was filled with dignity and with pride, and with a heart-winning graciousness. She gave her hand alike to rich and poor, and smiled kindly upon the village girls who loved her, saying she should not forget them, though the seas divided them. She would send them tokens of her remembrance now and again from the new world. And she kissed the little children,

and gave them pennies to buy sweeties as a wedding-feast. And she sent home presents to the old.

Then she left them—blessing-followed.

CHAPTER XVI.

FROM the church-door they set out upon their journey. It would be to Irion a long one—from end to end of England! To him a mere pretence of travelling, measured by the standard of Australian distances. But neither to him nor to her was weariness in the journey.

They were together—and alone.

Irion had chosen to visit the English Lakes. She had read so much of their loveliness, and of the sweet poetic influence of their English softness. Often she had dreamed day-dreams of hearing the music of oars moved by a lover's hand under the cloud shadows on the sun-gilded waters. It was the one picture of wedding splendour which was to become a reality for her. And it was enough since *he* led her towards it.

So little brings content, when love is the sum of life.

It was growing twilight in the railway-carriage, where he and she were sitting side by side with her hand clasped in his. The silence of a great happiness had fallen upon them now in the gloaming; but presently he broke it.

'My darling,' he said, 'such a strange desire has possessed me since I have called you wife. I would ask you to do something for my own selfish pleasure—may I?' pressing the hand he held to his lips, and keeping it there.

'May I!' smiling upon him lovingly. 'I wonder if you will say "may I" six months hence—I hope not. I don't like men who ask *permission* of their wives. It is an amiable weakness, I allow—but a weakness—and only pardonable for to-day. Well, make your request.'

'It is simple enough. I only want to hear my wife call me by my name, my own name, the name my mother gave me "very tenderly," and which had never been lost had she lived. I loved my mother, Irion—God knows how

fondly—but she died before—before her love for me was tried. Perhaps if she had lived, I had not been—what I am;' he spoke so low, she could only just hear him.

'And I should never have loved you,' she interrupted, putting her arms about him.

'Then I have nothing to regret'—a pause. 'I told you to call me Claud, dear one, did I not? Claud is my second name, the name by which strangers know me. All who have ever loved me in my life, all who have known me as my true self—a worthier self than you have as yet known, Irion; the self you shall know—all, I say, have called me—what my wife must call me.'

'I hope it's a pretty name,' she added, impudently.

Irion was not sentimental.

"Pretty enough, I suppose—Ulric.'

He felt her start and draw away from him, then come back closer to his embrace, hiding her face on his shoulder.

'Oh, Claud!' she almost sobbed, 'I cannot call you that—don't ask me.'

'Why?'

But he knew. Her face and her voice had told him.

'Because I only knew one other person of that name, and he was—a murderer.' She shuddered, and clung closer to him.

'And a friend of yours?' he questioned, screwing down his voice and manner as it were in an iron vice.

There was only one road open to him now.

'A neighbour—one Ulric Aylmer, the last of a good old race which died out in shame. Only think, Claud, a murderer before he was twenty!'

'Was he hung?' grimly.

'No—oh no! He ought to have been,' warmly, 'but a quibble of the law acquitted him, or rather, the devotion of a village girl, who, being the only witness of his crime, disappeared, and was not to be found to give evidence against him.'

Merciful heaven! if she could have seen his face at that moment! But he was staring out of the window, and she still leaning her head down upon his shoulder. He questioned her further. He must learn what she thought of

this Ulric Aylmer—she, of her own free thinking—that he might know how to deal with her. With what judgment did she judge him from the judgment-seat of her young humanity?

'But was he known to you *personally*, this Ulric Aylmer, that even his name disgusts you so that you cannot call me by the same?'

'Are you angry, Claud?' for she had noticed the hardness of his voice; 'but, indeed, if you are, it can make no difference, and you will not be after I have explained. I was a little child when the Aylmer murder was done, and by some stroke of ill-luck I was in the village street on the day when Ulric Aylmer was committed for trial by our magistrates. He passed me on the way, and laid his hand upon my head, saying to his companion, "What a pretty child!" He was an artist, Claud; nor only an artist, he had every good gift of God to man. Only think of it, Claud. Well, after that the servants and the villagers talked, as the ignorant will talk, saying he had brought a curse upon me by that touch. They almost made me believe

that the stain of blood was left on my hair. I, being an impressionable child, listened eagerly to their tales of horror about this man, till at last he became a sort of nightmare to me, haunting me always. My terror of meeting him again was such that for years afterwards I would not go out alone; and do you know that even now the old horror comes over me whenever his name is mentioned. How then could I call my husband by it? The very fact of your bearing it seem almost a bad omen for my future.'

She looked up from his shoulder, and met his eyes gazing down upon her with agony-filled intensity. If she mistook not there were tears in them.

In a moment her arms were about his neck.

'Claud! Claud! I did not mean that,' she cried out, seeing his pain. 'Of course I do not believe in omens. I was only sentimentalizing, Claud; don't look so hurt. Of course I shall be happy with you. If I had not been sure of it, should I have married you?' Then, more cheerfully: 'Do we deliberately poison ourselves? sane people, I mean; not

I, at any rate. I am too fond of my precious self. And because I have given that self into your keeping, you may be sure I do not doubt that you will treasure it, and that I shall never—never regret the gift. What is the matter with you, Claud, that my silly speech has wounded you so. Husband mine——' and she passed her hand over his forehead caressingly.

He, taking it passionately, pressed it over his eyes and held it there, saying only :

'I was thinking, dear one Let me be.'

And she, knowing his moods, obeyed him, nor spoke again for a time.

Strange that no glimmering of the truth came to her in this moment. And yet not strange—knowing her. Her faith in mankind was so perfect, her belief in human goodness so unshaken. As it would have been impossible to herself to dishonour herself by word, or deed, or thought, so were it still more impossible to her, that any one she loved should be capable of dishonour. Even had her faith been less strong there was not much in a name to connect a native of Australia

with Ulric Aylmer, of Aylmer, nor the man who to-day had stood before the face of the whole village, with him who was driven from it amidst groans and hisses. Besides, she had the person of Ulric Aylmer strong in her imagination (it was not true remembrance), and that of her husband could in nowise be likened to this old self-painted picture.

Even when he spoke, as he sometimes would, of a crime, she in her young liberality thought him only self-deprecating.

'Some youthful folly, doubtless,' she told herself, 'such as young men will commit, heedless of the consequences, which sit heavy on their consciences afterwards. Something which his companions chose to visit severely upon him, and deservedly perhaps; but nothing which repentance cannot wipe out, and after life make atonement for.' Irion had even imagined to herself the nature of this wrong, romancing, as girlhood will romance, of love and broken troths and spoiled lives. She must not question him, he had said, and thereupon she told herself proudly, believing she knew ·

'His honour does not fail him, for all his weakness; he will not betray the secrets of another.' And Irion had felt no desire to question further.

For all these reasons the name of Ulric, although hateful to her because of its association, suggested nothing of the truth—because she had never doubted.

We do not see spectres unless we are looking out for them with overwrought imagination.

But for Ulric Aylmer everything was changed. All his hopes were torn from him now—and scattered. Up to this moment he had hugged the belief that Irion, having been a child at the time of his disgrace, could have received no impression therefrom. She might have heard of him, he knew, but she would not feel anything of the old village prejudice, now in her womanhood. He had told himself that from mere association she would not despise him, even if a day should come in which she should learn his identity. She, loving him, would cling to him the closer, he had argued. 'For even Ulric Aylmer was *Not Guilty!*'

But now, as she clung to him horror-filled at the mere name, he learnt that she with all the others, had made herself sure of Ulric Aylmer's guilt; and she, before all others, would turn from him, knowing him. '*Then she shall not know*,' he swore to himself; 'I will keep her apart from all possible discoverers. In the new country we are safe.'

But the iron had entered his soul, and lay there cankering. Were it possible to him now—knowing what he could not but know, looking at her—he would have gone from her and left her alone—gone to his own destruction. But he could change nothing now. She was bound to him for life; all he could do was to keep the truth from her, and to love her as atonement. To reach, for her sake, that she might feel a pride in him, that fame which hitherto he had not cared to grasp. In music, in poetry, in art, he could compel men to acknowledge him. And for Irion's sake he would.

So he bent over her and kissed her, and said, speaking quite naturally now:

'Well, we will drop the hated name, then,

and be the Claud of yesterday. After all, it was only a bit of romance about my mother, which caused the wish to hear my wife speak the name she had spoken. It would have been music—melancholy music, since she is dead—but an echo of a love which has outlived all other. My wife and my mother—the two pure influences of my life,' he said dreamily.

There was a moment's silence, in which she clasped his hand very tightly; then looking straight into his eyes :

'I will call you Ulric,' she said, in her old decided way. 'I shall soon learn to like the name—*being yours.*'

'And I should hate it, after what you have told me.'

'Is it a common name in Australia? In England it is not.'

'Hardly common anywhere. You know it comes from Tennyson. No doubt, when "The Idylls" came out, a great many besides my mother gave it to their sons. Let us hope they are not all as good-for-nothing as I am, Irion.'

He was speaking lightly now, under one of those new influences which swayed him, coming suddenly upon him, and compelling interest if nothing beyond. A moment, and he was grave almost to melancholy; another, and he was a very child in his boisterous mirth; a third, and he was cold, and hard, and cynical; yet another, and behold him passion-moved, with a tenderness which was almost painful in its intensity.

Irion laughed when he called himself good-for-nothing, echoing his tone, and saying she had evidently made a bad bargain.

In this manner cheerfulness fell over them again, and there was no more mention of Ulric Aylmer.

Only his beautiful dwelling-house had been shaken at its foundations, and the first stone had fallen out of the crumbling walls to-day. He had seen it fall. But Irion was sleeping peacefully.

He bent and kissed her.

CHAPTER XVII.

SUNSET over Derwentwater. The very picture in all its details which Irion had drawn for herself, in fancy, years ago.

A July evening—brilliant with colour, and warm with the breath of nature, sun-ripened and life-giving. A waste of waters, mountain-shadowed; a little boat, and a three-days'-old husband. Music on the waters—the splash of the oars as Irion idly plied them, and the voice of the flute on which Claud Lewis spoke with passionate tenderness, breaking off now and again to hear the notes float away over the hills with a fainter and ever fainter echo.

He was a great musician—it was his very soul which impelled him. His nature went out in sound. Then, and then only, the truth

which was in him shook off its soiled and ragged garments and, beautiful as God made it, lay bare before the eyes of men. In these moments no one could doubt the greatness of the man, no one deny his power. To Irion, listening, it was a voice from heaven calling her to thankfulness.

And they drifted on amongst the lights and the shadows whither the night breeze carried them.

Presently Irion asked him a question, he having laid aside his flute.

'Claud,' bending forward and putting her hand on his knee, 'did you ever love before?'

For a moment he did not answer her, then very tenderly:

'Yes, Irion, I did.'

'Real love?' she asked, without anger or jealousy.

'Very real.'

'Tell me about it, will you? if the subject is not painful. How did it end—since end it evidently did, or I were not your wife.'

'The end,' dreamily; 'it was commonplace enough, dear one. She would not have me.'

'She did not love *you* then?'

'Yes; until her love was put to the test. Yes, and I was fool enough to stake my all on her truth. I lost—as gamblers always lose in the end.'

'Poor Claud! Were you really ruined by her? Is it because of her that your life has been such a blank?'

'No; that is my own doing—or was. It shall be so no longer.'

'But she was the cause of your failure, I see.'

'Of course we all try to make a *cause* for our wrong doing. It is never *ourselves*. We justify ourselves at the expense of that cause. But I doubt our title to a Satan as the originatot of our sins. Of course, it is comfortable, since we are no longer responsible. But it's hard on Satan.'

'Is your Satan alive or dead?'

'I don't know'—a pause—then with painful earnestness: 'But, Irion, I do not like to talk of her. Love is sacred always. Do you not feel it so, dear one? If I were dead to you, metaphorically or actually, could you discuss me with any follower? having loved me before you knew him.'

'Your follower,' she answered, laughing. 'Do you suppose that if I lost you to-morrow there would *follow* some one else? No, my husband, I could never love twice. Men are different.'

'I said the same once. We do not know ourselves. But my wife doubts the reality of my love for her, perhaps?'

'Who could doubt you, Claud, knowing you? Whatever you do is done with all the strength of your nature.'

'Even nothing,' satirically.

'Yes; even nothing. But there is to be no more emptiness in our life. Which reminds me—have you heard whether your play is accepted?'

'Not yet.'

'Are you bound to be back in Melbourne by September?'

'So far bound that I wish to be, and intend to be.'

'Can you not stay to see the result of your play—provided of course that it should be accepted?'

'I could if I wished.'

'And don't you wish?'

'No, dear.'

He answered so decidedly that Irion did not say anything more. But her own plans were different. If he were to be famous, his fame must be in England, amongst Englishmen, or it were no fame, Irion thought. If they accepted this drama, it was the first step taken, and while the pride of it was still upon him, he must make another over the same ground. Now was the time of her greatest influence over him. In these early days of their love he would gratify even her whims. And it was more than a whim to remain in London and see the result of his labours.

Irion was too wise to put forward her desire now, when time and opportunity were unfitting. Opportunity is everything. But the foolishness or the impatience of womanhood are so often deaf to congruities. We want a hundred pounds, and we ask for it—while our husband wants his dinner! We are refused. Oh fools and blind! Men are but clay, and clay is always mouldable—in clever hands and cunning. Only let us take

heed, lest in the moulding we produce a Mephistopheles instead of a Faust.

'Why do you live in Melbourne?' Irion asked presently, for the furthering of her little plan. 'Why, having money, don't you establish yourself in London, where your talents will be better appreciated? But I suppose you love your own country best. We English-born have a way of fancying that all who speak our language must feel as we do about our island, and call it *home*.'

'You are right, it is home.'

'But how—for strangers?'

'We are Englishmen, and England is the mainspring which keeps us all in working order. We know that were this broken we are at a standstill. So we cling around it, and protect it; and because of the share we have in giving it strength we learn to love it. And where our love is, our home is.'

'Then why not stay at home and prove your theory?'

'Because——'

But he could not answer her. He could not say that it was for her sake he would

hasten off English ground, lest some night a sower should come, and sow poisoned seed in the garden of their happiness, which bearing fruit, she some morning should gather unawares, and tasting, learn that 'all men are liars.'

'Because,' he said, almost angrily, 'I prefer to live in Melbourne.'

She knew that it was natural he should like his own country best. But still she believed that for love of her he would by-and-by change. And so she did not resent his sternness, but spoke of other things. Of the beauty which lay around them, and of the perfectness of nature—and in this they had sympathy.

But the night shadows were creeping over them.

For some time longer they wandered about on the lake, or lay still, bathed in the evening coolness. Then they went back to the little cottage on the border, a tiny nest hidden away amongst the trees. A place where artists came, and poets, to give substance to their dreams. It was empty now, save for Irion

and her husband, who found in it the very spirit of peace.

They were happy days—those of Irion's honeymoon—not filled with strife or vague uneasiness, as some. Not weary or laggard, or bringing with them disillusion. No love could have been more perfect in its kind than his; no happiness more pure than hers. All the old man—the old cynical man—had gone out of him. He was a new creature. A man strong in the strength of his own possible, and certain of his own power.

Often, as they drifted about on the lake, he would take up pencil and colours, and with a master's quickness catch the cloud-forms, or the light-colours as they floated over the hills, compelling them to imperishability in some new world, which his brain and his hand created for them. Often too he would break out into song. And Irion, writing down the thoughts as he uttered them, learned that for him all nature spoke in a voice of heart-moving sweetness; that himself, opening his soul, seemed to grasp the universe, and to set it before the eyes of men untarnished by his touch.

Sometimes he would unbridle his reason, and set it to run riot over space, so that he talked of eternities and progressions as things conceivable; till worlds were to him atoms, and atoms worlds in the sum of their infinity.

But this Irion did not like so well. He frightened her with the vastness of his imaginings. She began to feel of no account in the immensity of his creation, and even her God dwindled into nothing, before the Great Eternal which seemed to hold her in its grasp as Claud Lewis talked. She did not see as he saw—her woman's mind was not capable of so much expansion—or her education had been too narrow. She could not grasp, she could only fear, feeling all she had held as solid shaking at its foundations; all she had held as great growing infinitely small.

How painful it is to see our faith sitting in judgment on itself!

And because of the smoothness of Irion's life amongst the lakes, it became—as all smooth places in our life's journey—only an objectless

stretch of level country lying between the hills. We look backwards, and we do not even notice these vast level plains, or recall aught of the peaceful journey across them. We take note only of the mountains up which we have toiled, or of the precipices down which we have fallen headlong. And we cry out that life is all weariness or satiety. We were happy crossing those objectless plains, only the greater annuls the less, and we men will strive after magnitude. Even so Irion, in later years, forgetting the peace which laid over the early days of her womanhood, cried out that there was no justice in heaven or on earth.

They lived for a month amongst the lakes, and in the hill country—riding, walking, rowing; filled with the fulness of life. They took little heed of the passage of the hours—for only pain notes how the minutes lag. And there was no leaven of pain in all their pleasure. He had found strength to compass this thing, and having done it, it was over, as also the agony of it. The new worthy life had begun, and cast back the old one far away

into the distance. Had Claud Lewis been a weaker man, he had not found himself able to throw conscience from him as a used-up garment. He had not found it possible to overlook the question, 'At what price have you bought your fancied redemption? Will Heaven condone the means, because of the end reached? and if not reached, may not your hell burn fiercer a thousandfold?'

But he was deaf, with the deafness of desperation. Irion loved him. She had laid the coveted treasure at his feet. Should he, then, not pick it up, because a thunderbolt might fall upon him and crush him. If it did so, he should but have failed. And that were the end.

Thus he argued to-day, with Irion, his wife, by his side; thus he had argued yesterday, before she became his. And even her faith in him had no power to shame him, because he told himself always, 'I love her; I can make her happy, and *I will*.'

No warning voice called after him: '*The wages of sin is death*,' or, if it called, he had not heeded.

CHAPTER XVIII.

'I've had a letter from Irion, Agatha,' said Naomi Hurst between the lights, sitting at the open window, 'dying' of the heat, with Mrs. Betrix also 'dying' opposite her. They were going to Scarborough to-morrow, just in time, they hoped, to save the remnant of life left in them.

'Of course, she's the happiest woman in creation,' Mrs. Betrix remarked, sneering; 'all brides are in the first letter to their girl-friend. It gradually falls off afterwards, till in a year or two, more or less, they are the most miserable. Keep that letter, Naomi, and compare it with one you'll get this time —three years, let us say.'

'I don't quite see why. Irion's a good-tempered girl enough. It's temper which

upsets things. If one can only be quiet, one can always be happy.'

'That depends upon the man one has to deal with. Irion's wild beast will not think twice before growling, I'll engage.'

'Takes two to quarrel, though.'

'Does it? Well, I'd rather quarrel, than sit meekly and be tyrannised over by a semi-civilised savage.'

'If it amused him to *imagine* he was my tyrant, I shouldn't mind.'

'I'm quite sure of one thing—that fellow, Lewis, only frightened Irion into marrying him. She was in love with Gilbert, if ever a girl was.'

'I give her credit for better taste.'

'Who can account for girls' tastes? and bad as Gilbert is, he's the better of the two. He is at least honest.'

'Isn't Lewis?'

'*No*; decidedly and emphatically *no*—mark my words.'

'If people marked all your words, my dear Agatha, they would have little spare time on their hands for anything more amusing.'

'Am I not always right though?'

'Of course you are—You take care that it shall be so.'

'As I was saying, she ought to have married Gilbert; they are head over ears in love with one another. Well, there's one thing to be said in her favour—she's no fool, for all her country bringing up. She chose the richer man.'

'If you judge her in that light, she might have been wiser still and considered Gilbert's *prospects*, and waited, to be the greater gainer in the end.'

'Prospects! Who in these days believes in prospects? "Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof"—and the good too. We never believe in it before it comes. I shouldn't be a bit surprised to find us all paupers to-morrow, and Irion knew that. She has her country faith in city rottenness.'

'Well, when we come to grief you can go on the stage, Agatha; acting comes so naturally to you,' satirically; 'and I'll sit amongst the gods and clap you—if it's not too warm.'

'I suppose,' ignoring the cut, 'we shall be expected to call when they come back to London; but I don't think I shall trouble myself. What's the good of calling on people who will be at the Antipodes in a couple of months? and whilst we are on the subject—if you'll take my advice, Naomi, you'll not make yourself too common in their house.'

'Why?'

'I have my reasons.'

'They are not much good, if you can't give them.'

'If you must know, I have not over much faith in one or the other of that couple. He's simply a bore; but she is er—er——'

'A very good-looking girl, Agatha. I wonder,' dreamily, 'why a woman has only to be good-looking to make other woman hate her?'

'You don't suppose I fear a rival in her?' with supreme contempt; 'or should fear if she were in London all the rest of her life? No, my dear, the milkmaid and shepherdess style has gone out—happily for me.'

It must be remembered that Mrs. Betrix

was *a beauty*, and she had a right to an opinion on the subject; at least, such a right was granted her five years ago.

We do not resign our claim because people are too stingy to pay us our due any longer. The people are at fault. We are still ourselves.

When will a beauty be seen to retire gracefully at the right moment?

Mrs. Betrix had not retired. People were still too civil to sigh aloud after looking at her. But then Mrs. Betrix powdered herself with gold, and painted herself with gold, and hung herself with gold from head to foot, so that the glamour of it blinded her humble servants. Little wonder that they smiled upon her, and little wonder that she claimed homage as *a beauty* still.

Naomi was very much admired, but her admirers were limited to a certain class and kind; she was not startling, like her sister, and side by side with her dwindled into absolute nonentity. Nevertheless, men fell in love with Naomi, and they did not with Agatha Betrix!

But then Naomi was twenty and Agatha Betrix thirty—'which explains it,' as Naomi remarked in her dry way. Agatha herself had a favourite romance that thirty was the pride of womanhood. Naomi never argued with her; it would have been too much trouble. But Naomi was very well satisfied with herself; and if she was satisfied, why should not other people be so too? She never denied any one their innocent pleasures, or cavilled over their beliefs.

'Well, you know, I like Irion,' Naomi remarked, but not with any warmth. She only felt bound to make some answer to Mrs. Betrix's suggestion that all was not as it should be with Mrs. Lewis.

'I'd like at a distance, if I were you, till you know something more of her. One of a family is enough dangling about her. I'm sure Gilbert sickens one of the very name of her.'

'A man never talks about a girl he's in love with. You are breaking down your own theory, Agatha. I should subside, if I wanted to keep up my character for wisdom.'

'*Men* don't perhaps; but Gilbert's not a man—never will be; he's an empty-headed, precocious boy, and such he'll remain till doomsday. For all that, he's managed to pick up a pretty good share of men's vices, like all boys.'

'Is he so horribly vicious? I hadn't remarked it. What does he do?'

'What does he *not* do?' angrily.

'Oh, well, if he goes in for everything, he's pretty safe. It's your partial sinners who come to public shame. They try to go out of their old road, and lose themselves. The others know every turning and every by-way, and so sneak out of it somehow. I'd rather Gilbert got out of a mess if he must needs get into one. It's not pleasant to be *publicly* ashamed of one's belongings, whatever one might be in private.'

'Not that you ever feel any shame about anything, Naomi. You are the most indifferent person I ever met. It's not an enviable quality; you lose so much enjoyment.'

'And escape so much pain.'

'And people think you've no heart.'

'So spare themselves the trouble of trying to break it.'

Mrs. Betrix was about to make some remark when a loud double knock at the front door gave her something more interesting to think about. She peeped out between the curtains (it's not fashionable to peep, but irresistible if you are sure of not being seen), and said, with some disgust:

'The irrepressible again! I shall make myself scarce.' And before she had finished speaking, Mrs. Betrix was out of the room.

Naomi shut her eyes, leant back in her chair, and was to all seeming asleep. Vere Penrose came in. She lifted her eyelids, put out her finger-tip to him, remarked, 'Morning, Vere,' and subsided. He was her cousin; there was no need to be polite to him. She noticed, nevertheless, that he wore a new suit of clothes, and an extra 'rarity' in his button-hole. 'He is going somewhere,' she told herself, and thought it worth while not to appear quite asleep.

'I've come to fetch *you*, Nan,' he said, sitting astride a very small chair, and leaning

over its back. Vere Penrose thought it gave him dignity to take up unconventional positions, and to suck the nob of his walking-cane or umbrella.

'What for?' Naomi drawled, without the slightest show of interest.

'I've brought round the new stanhope and those cobs of Grantley's. I've bought them, you know.'

'More fool you, I should say.'

'Why—now, Nan! you said yourself that they would be just the thing for my stanhope. It was because of you I went in for them. 'Thought you'd like sitting behind them, you know.'

'When did I say that?'

'Last month; don't you remember?'

'Last month! That was June. This is July.'

'What difference does that make?'

'All the difference; who wants to show in the park at the end of July? You must be growing idiotic in your old age.

'Won't you come out then?' dismally.

'I want to call on the Wallaces to say

good-bye. You may drive me there, if you like,' graciously.

'All right! look alive, then. And I say Nan'—a pet name of his—'put on that stunning *feuille morte* costume. Suits you to a T.'

Another way Vere Penrose had of being manly was to talk Anglo-Americanisms.

'I shall suit my own taste, not yours,' she answered, leaving the room.

But she appeared half an hour afterwards in the 'stunning' costume, and drove away side by side with Vere Penrose.

Of course he took that opportunity of telling her, as he had told her a thousand times before, that she could have the whole turn out, himself included, for her own to-morrow, if she would. But Naomi, satiate with the good things of this life, was not to be deluded into fancying Vere—a man.

'What is he then?' Gilbert asked her one day.

'A tadpole with its legs half developed,' she had answered; 'trying to imagine himself a frog, by taking impossible leaps out of the

water. He tumbles in again, of course—being giddy in the new element, but that doesn't alter his idea that two feet and half a tail ought to enable him to hop; and that it's the element which is undeveloped, not himself.'

CHAPTER XIX.

WHEN they left the Lakes, Irion and her husband came to London. There were preparations to make before setting out on their journey to Melbourne. Household gods to purchase, whose familiar faces should make *home* for Irion of the new country. Therefore for another month they would remain in England, and so reach Melbourne just before Christmas.

Moreover, Claud Lewis had business to transact, which, to Irion's surprise, he wished done in England. 'He must make a will,' he told her, 'lest some day she should find herself penniless; and a settlement, lest he should turn out a brute, and forsaking her, rely upon her dependence for her servitude.' She only

laughed at his caution, having no fear that from him any mean thing could proceed.

It was Irion who had pleaded for a month 'to prepare,' and at last he had said, 'Very well, then, *a month*, to please you, dear one.' For he told himself that in London who would know them? Who make any inquiries? Who come across their path to tell Irion what man she had married? Like Arthur, he consoled himself with, '*There's few or none do know me* in England, and even that few would require a great deal of persuading.'

Accordingly he took rooms in Kensington—cheerful rooms and handsome, overlooking the gardens, that Irion should be reminded of the country. They were costly lodgings. He did not wish her to fancy that money would ever be stinted her, or comfort, or luxury. He even made her have a carriage and a pair of greys (her favourite colour) for the month; and a man-servant, and a maid, who were to be taken back to Australia if they proved themselves capable.

Irion was frightened at his recklessness of costs. She knew he was rich—yes—Gilbert Hurst had always said so. But her ideas of

riches were no wider than her other country ideas. And when day after day he came home to her with jewels of silver and jewels of gold, decking her with them proudly, she thought that ruin stared them in the face. She taxed him with extravagance. But he, in his new-found happiness, laughed at her, and kissed her with a lover's kiss, and told her it would take some years yet to bring them to the workhouse.

Nevertheless Irion was almost glad that they should be going out of the reach of temptation soon. She supposed that in Melbourne there would not be the same field for reckless extravagance. Innocent country-reared Irion!

But more than all she marvelled over the man himself. In her husband she saw no trace of Naomi's 'Aborigine' who had come into Park Place and asked for an unfurnished garret as a lodging for himself and his dog! The 'wild beast' for whose surly growls Mrs. Betrix had shown such magnificent scorn! Now, Claud must have around him all things beautiful and artistic, 'as a background for

Irion,' he said. But he did not forsake Bimboo; Bimboo only grew luxurious side by side with his master, and quite as easily. Bimboo stood in the place of a spoiled child now; before, he had occupied Irion's ground as companion, friend, society, the only creature who, loving Claud Lewis faithfully, found faithful love in return. And now Irion, because of this old faithfulness, loved the dog; so that the jealousy which Gilbert Hurst had prophesied between them seemed as yet afar off.

But for all the change which had come over him, Claud Lewis was himself strong in the strength of his own personality. The same fitful moods, the same wandering fancies, the same outward hardness and excessive inward sensitiveness.

Only over the whole there was a halo of light which had not been there before.

Had Mrs. Betrix seen him now, or Naomi, they had only found him better dressed than of old, somewhat less terse of speech, somewhat more civil in his own house than in theirs—nothing beyond—unless perchance they had

come in after dinner, and found him lying on the sofa in luxurious idleness, with flowers around him and pictures and books. With Irion by his side, his arm about her, and her eyes love-filled resting on him. Then indeed had they said that another man was in Claud Lewis's place; adding that it was 'only what they had expected'—to cover their ignorance.

And Mrs. Betrix might see him so yet.

For to-morrow Irion was going to call upon Naomi. Naomi, who, after all, was the cause of this happy husband getting. Naomi must see what a success it had all been. Not that Irion expected her to rejoice on that account, having already had a letter from her, in which she wrote, 'One would think, seeing your surprise at your own happiness, that you expected to be miserable. But why? Men are not all brutes, and women are not all fools. Most people are negatively happy, my dear, if they don't happen to catch the small-pox and get disfigured for life.'

Gilbert Hurst had called upon them on the first day of their coming to London. Lewis was not at home, and Irion had entertained

him. He had stopped to lunch with her, and she had driven him to his club later in the afternoon.

Gilbert seemed to be enjoying London to the utmost in these last weeks of his sojourn in England. And he looked the part. The man about town who won't be there much longer, but is bent upon being everywhere while life is in him.

'One does mourner at one's own funeral, you know, Mrs. Lewis,' he said to Irion at lunch, 'when one departs from these happy hunting-grounds. It's being buried alive, living in Melbourne—or, for the matter of that, anywhere—*out of London.*'

'I don't think I shall find it so,' she answered him; 'indeed, I am sure I shan't. I have made up my mind to like Melbourne.'

'Benighted being! I don't envy your awakening. However, it won't be quite so deadly there now, thank the Lord.'

'Why not?'

'You'll be there.'

'Thanks for the compliment.'

'I say,' Gilbert asked presently, putting

on a comic twist of the eye and mouth, and bringing his chair an inch or two nearer hers —'I say; tell us, on the strict Q T, there's a good creature—is Lewis given to the greens and yellows?'

'The *what?*' laughing.

'Jealous?' grimly.

'Jealous! oh yes, I fancy he would be. Why?'

'Well, you know, I have a sort of a humbugging way of talking to girls sometimes—haven't I?' he added, as if there might be a doubt about it.

'Not at all,' she said, echoing his tone. 'You are propriety personified!'

'I suppose I must look out.'

'I advise you to,' she answered, but did not encourage him to further the subject.

'By-the-bye, here's the mater's card,' he said, having suddenly remembered what was given him to do. 'She told me to say that she has smallpox, or typhus fever, or something of that kind—perhaps it might have been a cold in the head; whatever it was prevented her calling *in persona*. But she wants you to come over to afternoon tea on

Friday.' A pause; then, persuasively, '*Do*—I'll be at home if you will.'

'Very kind of you.'

'Don't pretend to be satirical—first place, it's not your nature; and second, it is not over jolly for a fellow.'

'You can bear it. But will you remember to tell your mother I shall have much pleasure in seeing her on Friday as she proposes—or must I write?'

'Perhaps you'd better write. I know you hate it, but one ought to do penance for one's sins.'

'Take the moral to yourself, and carry that weighty matter—a message—for once in your life.'

And so Irion had engaged herself to visit the Hursts on Friday.

She did not ask what beyond.

It is always the infinitely small which produces the infinitely great.

Gilbert Hurst parted company with her at his club, whither she had driven him. It was on her road to Bond Street. She had not stepped out of her way—Nor he either.

After dinner that evening, Irion, talking to her husband on the sofa, told him of Gilbert's visit, and of Mrs. Hurst's invitation for Friday afternoon.

'And you are going?' he remarked, dryly.

'Yes. Why not? unless you have anything better to do.'

'I!—I shall not go.'

'No! Well I didn't quite expect you to. But you don't want me at home, do you?'

'Certainly not, dear one.'

'I wonder,' she said, after a pause, 'why you don't like Naomi? I do so much.'

'She's no freshness about her—is too cynical, and used up. The character does not suit a woman. Some men can stand it—not many. Why do you like her?'

'She's an amusing companion, and *fearfully* large minded! Now, Claud, you, who uphold liberal judgments on humanity and human weakness, ought to admire Naomi vastly. She positively shocks me with the *wideness* of her views. Even crimes count as nothing with her—provided of course she

be not personally involved in the shame of them.'

'How do you know?'

'One day at Rockford we were talking about young Aylmer. I was saying I hoped it would never be my fate to be required to meet him as a neighbour, for I could never take his hand in mine without a shudder. Naomi laughed at my *prejudices*, as she called them, and said that since the law had seen fit to hold him *not guilty*, it were mere Christian charity to give him the benefit of the doubt—or something equally absurd. As if the Law is Gospel! I remember, too, that Naomi ended by saying she should rather *like* to meet Ulric Aylmer than otherwise, she being disposed to admire him, just because all of us at Rockford were so merciless towards him.'

'And she is right, Irion,' he answered very gravely; 'even in my eyes my wife is narrow-minded on this subject, and prejudiced. How can any one be certain of another's guilt unless they were witness of it. May not the law be right after all, and this Aylmer more sinned against than sinning?'

'The law knew he was guilty as well as the people of Rockford knew it; but as the chief and only witness against him could not be found, they were glad to seize the outlet of insufficient proof.'

'You flatter your country, Irion! But tell me—do the people of Rockford say the girl loved him?' he asked, sarcastically.

'Of course she did.'

'Why of course?' with still bitterer sarcasm.

'She ran away from her home and from her people, lest she should be compelled to give evidence against him.'

'That might be generosity, not love.'

'And she committed suicide.'

'Moral cowardice, perhaps.'

'What an argumentative mood you are in,' Irion said, laughing, and kissing his hand, which she had been holding. And nothing in the touch of it told her of the pain she was giving him.

Always as she spoke on this subject, he felt the depth of her hatred, and the strength of her prejudice. Always he learnt more and

more surely that should she know the truth about him, even the name of husband would not set him out of reach of her scorn. Scorned, Oh God! and by Irion!—More than the bitterness of death were in it.

And now, only now, because he loved her so truly, he began to tell himself that she would be justified. He had blinded his own eyes, and stopped his own ears, and refused to hear the voice of his manhood crying out for its lost honour. He had drugged himself with love, telling himself that love is all of this world's worth. He had said, 'If she love me, if I love her, what will she care whether I be Ulric Aylmer or Claud Lewis? What is in a name? At least, I have not deceived her. I have not told her I am stainless, or of good report. She will see reason enough why I should drop my own identity, if so be that people teach her the truth. She will know how little of mercy was shown me by my fellows, how little of justice even, except where it was misplaced.'

Yes; he had said so *then*, arguing with his conscience. *Now* he was silent. With his

wife by his side, loving her, and seeing her infinite trust, he knew that he had wronged her. And every shaft as she launched it at Ulric Aylmer, fell upon his heart to torture it, or to harden it—which?

But his penance had begun.

And Irion knew nothing of his sufferings, because he had the physical strength to bind down his muscles, and compel his expression into servitude to his will.

How often do we sit hand in hand with the love of our life, telling ourselves that it and we are one, fancying that we can read the thoughts which our love is thinking, and feel the feelings which our love is feeling, because they are our own! Oh! well for some of us, that in those moments we do not become clairvoyant to see the truth as it is written there. How many of us would read, and live? Surely there is no God we should worship with such thanksgiving as our poor besotted *faith*.

Therefore Irion was happy, with a happiness of which she had never dreamed in her largest dreams of bliss. He was so good to her. His

love was so great, and his tenderness so perfect. For her pleasure he spent his days in writing and painting, working with all the power which lay in him. He and she must find out together which was the greatest of his talents —to cultivate it. All day he worked, and in the evening brought her the result of his labours. She was astonished at his greatness. Whether he wrote, or whether he painted, there lay the man himself before her, with all his strength, and all his over-sensitive weakness. His changeability of mood—his melancholy—and his gaiety. His cynicism—and his tenderness—but his power always.

After a day or two he received notice that they had accepted his drama at the 'Empress' Theatre. It would be played by the strongest caste in London.

Irion had done her work cleverly. They were going to stay in England to see it brought out!

So far she had conquered.

CHAPTER XX.

On Friday Irion went to call on the Hursts, as she had promised. No merciful fate stretched out a hand to hold her back, and she went. It was only a morning call at Park Place! Only—only a walk. Only a drive. Only a dance. And our whole life is changed.

> 'Alas! how easily things go wrong;
> A sigh too much or a kiss too long;
> Then follows a mist and a blinding rain;
> And life is never the same again.'

No—never in all the years which lie before us.

Mrs. Hurst had not yet finished her afternoon sleep when Irion arrived, and Mrs. Betrix had gone out to call on some more profitable

acquaintance than a Mrs. Lewis. She was destined for Australia, and would never be of their 'circle'—she was not worth staying at home for. Miss Hurst was 'studying,' but Naomi could receive her; Naomi was old enough to 'be useful' now in taking unpleasant work off Mrs. Betrix's hands; such work as the entertaining of old maids, invalids, or nonentities of the Lewis type.

So Naomi received her, with just a discernible degree of gratification at the visit.

'I'm glad to see you, Irion,' she said, taking the tips of her fingers. Naomi did not kiss her girl friends. 'Gush' was not in her line. 'You are glad to get back to London, I suppose? That's a nice dress. Who made it?'

'I did.'

'Does you credit—you're a genius, Mrs. Lewis—sit down.'

Naomi drew a chair up to the open window—for the afternoon was very hot—and seating herself opposite, she composed herself to listen to Irion's 'amusing talk.' It did not seem to 'amuse' her much, but that was the Naomi of old, and Irion knew her. Naomi did

not make foolish inquiries about her friend's happiness in her new state—'who could judge of happiness in six weeks?'—and she took everything Irion told her of the pleasures of their Lake trip as a matter of course; a part of the ceremony of marriage; a sort of sequel to the bride-cake and orange-flowers.

'And when is your Aborigine going to carry you off to his native wilds?' Naomi asked, after a silence, for something to say.

'We are going to stay in London for three months! His play is coming out at the "Empress" in November. We shall sail in December, probably.'

'So you get your own way with him—quite right; get it as long as you can; and make the most of it. One is not always bride and bridegroom.'

'You evidently expect Claud to turn out a brute by-and-by,' laughing.

'N—n—no, I don't,' doubtfully, throwing her arms lazily over her head, and tipping her chair backwards. 'Men are not brutes—they're only crochety.'

'Then one must indulge their crochets.'

'Not always—one must know one's man first. Some will stand spoiling — some won't.'

There was a pause, and Irion changed the conversation.

'Oh, by-the-bye, tell me, Naomi—how does one go about getting a servant in London?'

'What kind?'

'A maid—one who would go out to Mel bourne with me; that's to say, if I like her well enough to take her after trial at home.'

'Old, dowdy, ugly, of course. Young married people never like flashy maids.'

'No, not ugly. I hate all ugly things—for the rest, it doesn't matter so long as she knows her duties. I can't teach her, never having been educated to a maid myself. Claud wishes me to have one, or I shouldn't. Her place will be a sinecure, I expect. I hate being muddled over. I much prefer doing everything for myself. But if Claud likes to see me doing "the thing," I may as well gratify him. One does well to let men have their way in small things—so we shall the more easily get ours in greater. It is the

constantly opposing and thwarting men which makes them tyrants, don't you think?'

'You really have some sense in you, Irion! I am almost disposed to allow that country people are not the fools we Londoners would believe them. But about the maid—your Claud is right; of course you must have one. Society says maids are a necessity. Society won't stand contradiction *yet*. There's no knowing what a century of woman's rights may bring forth. Suppose I could supply you with the article you want; now, at once, without a struggle on your part, would you bless me, this frizzling weather?'

'This or any other. If there is a thing I detest it is servant-hunting.'

'Well, when Clarisse—you knew Clarisse—when Clarisse left, I thought I should like an English maid, for a change. One gets so tired of the same thing always! So I took an English maid; but after all I don't like an English maid—I think I shall try a German. Well! you may take Elizabeth off my hands. That's another objection—I was obliged to call her Elizabeth! Her name is Smith! Fancy Smith for a maid!'

'What's in a name?' Irion answered cheerfully. 'Besides, I am not in fashionable society, to offend its delicate ears by calling my maid Smith. But what is Smith like? That's the question.'

'Oh, a first-class servant, as English servants go—good-looking enough, rather dowdy—but you don't mind respectable dowds. Will you see her?'

'What's her age?'

'Doubtful—Thirty—or more, or less. Might be anything under a hundred.'

'I should like to see her, if it's no trouble.'

Naomi dragged herself wearily to the bell, pulled it with a used-up kind of pull, which just succeeded in making it heard downstairs. This, from its very feebleness, was known to be Naomi's call for her maid, and the maid answered.

She was much what Naomi had described her, this Elizabeth Smith. A good-looking woman of doubtful, but almost middle, age, with nothing remarkable about her, except an extreme composure of manner and absolute self-possession. Well dressed, but simply;

well spoken, and, as Naomi had said, a very "presentable" servant, if not fashionable.

Naomi told her the reason of her summons upstairs, and Irion questioned her. She was not only willing, but pleased, when they told her that she would be required to go out to Australia; and she seemed in all ways what Irion sought.

Irion engaged her then and there, with Naomi's consent, and she was to come to her the following week, dispensing with the usual month's warning to Naomi for Irion's greater convenience.

'It would be well to know as much of the woman as possible before settling to take her abroad with them,' Irion said.

After it was all arranged, Elizabeth turned to Naomi, and with a quiet grace thanked her for having found the new situation. And this same calm dignity did in some wise set her apart from the crowd of servants who, in Irion's life, had passed before her unnoticed.

After Elizabeth had left them, tea was brought in, and Mrs. Hurst came downstairs. She felt bound to put herself beyond the

implication of absolute rudeness. She had no wish to see Mrs. Lewis. Mrs. Lewis was 'no one;' but even nobodies have an unpleasant way of compelling us to self-torture for the good of our social name. Passive neglect is sometimes possible; active rudeness never. Society can shut its eyes to the one at will; the other makes a noise, and is ugly and obtrusive, and society objects. We dare not be called rude. We can only afford to ignore.

After tea Mrs. Betrix came in, and she questioned Irion—with the right of absolute superiority—of her life past, present, and future; of her domestic arrangements, and of her husband. Mrs. Betrix was never afraid—'Had Irion succeeded in civilising him yet? Did he still rank women below dogs, or had he made an exception in her favour?' and so forth, till Irion could scarcely answer her civilly.

In this moment passive dislike of Mrs. Betrix grew into absolute hatred of this woman, whose every word was an implied sneer at the husband Irion held so dear. She was clever enough not to show her annoyance,

not to gratify Mrs. Betrix by appearing to notice it. But the task of silence was a hard one.

Happily, her torturer did not stay long in the room. Time was too precious to waste it on wives of Australian scribblers or the like. Mrs. Betrix wanted a cup of tea, or she had not entered the room at all, knowing who was there.

Inwardly Naomi objected to her sister's manner towards her friend; but she was too lazy to resent it, even after Irion had left. Too lazy, or too good-tempered. 'What was the use?' she argued; 'it would not change Mrs. Betrix, and it would make a row in the family.' Naomi hated a row; it necessitated exertion, and Naomi's philosophy was to take life quietly at all its turnings, neither straining at gnats nor swallowing camels, nor making any other unnecessary muscular efforts.

But she could see, and hear, and feel, and her sister's boasted snubbing powers jarred against her better sense of delicacy. She did not love Agatha, nor Agatha her; but neither stooped to quarrel. It is not fashionable to

quarrel. Only backbiting can be worn wit any grace this season.

Naomi and Irion had another pleasant hal hour together. Then Gilbert came in, an offered to walk home with her. She had sen the carriage away, preferring to walk home i the evening cool 'for exercise,' and she wa glad of his company on the road. Gilbert wa rough and slangy, and no favourite in 'good society, but Irion liked him. He had the kindes heart, the most generous feelings that ha ever wrapped themselves in unbecoming ga ments. And beyond all this, his devotion t Claud Lewis as the man who had saved h life, and as the friend of his exile, made hi dear to Irion. His was the open-hearted lov of a school-boy, for the chum who has stood b him in his trouble and brought him clear ou of it at last.

But Irion and her husband always feare for Gilbert Hurst. He was a rolling ston and he had been set rolling so early in lif that not a blade of softening moss had bee allowed to grow upon him ever. His natur was warm; but it had had cold water poure

over it by his family, till he believed all sensitiveness washed out of him, he himself grown indifferent now to one and all of them, careless of their good opinion, and of their liking or disliking of his doings. But they could not crush down his high animal spirits by their coldness. If he put them in chains by day at home, he never forgot to take them out for exercise at night, allowing them to run riot over the length and breadth of London. In Melbourne it was the same. Claud had told Irion that there was no stability in the man, and an utter recklessness of consequences. Pleasure was to be bought at any price, and the price paid when asked—and Lewis had added, 'I was not the best companion he could have picked up in those days, you know, Irion.'

'Never mind,' Irion had answered. 'We will atone for all our misdeeds by making a saint of Gilbert Hurst.'

'Is not one proselyte enough?' he said, kissing her. 'Confine your attention to me, please.'

Irion remembered this conversation as she walked home from Park Place, side by side

with Gilbert Hurst that Friday evening, whicl seemed so eventless to her—then.

Having brought Irion home, Gilbert Hurs stayed to dinner with them as a matter o course. Irion was a country girl, and she had not forgotten country hospitality. Lewis wa always glad to see his old friend, although Gilbert did little else than banter him abou his 'taming,' saying he should expect to se himself taking a wife next, and doing th respectable.

'Never mind, old fellow,' Gilbert said, afte dinner, when they were alone smoking, 'a wife becomes you as well as those bags o Poole's. By Jove! you in soft raiment How long will it *wear*, eh? I give it si months.'

'It will wear as long as my wife is b to take care of it,' Lewis answered gravely.

'That's right, old fellow! go it; never b ashamed of yourself, you know.'

Only a jest this, but another whip-las falling over the open wound. Lewis flushed and answered angrily, to cover his pain:

'Is a man never to turn round and walk the other way, because he was fool enough to start on a wrong road?'

'By no means, man; only one naturally expects to see him look a little puzzled over the cross-roads, instead of turning up his nose at a sign-post as you do.'

'Who's the sign-post?—you?'

'By Jove! no; reason, my son, *reason!* Men don't always remain in love, thank the Lord.'

He was going to say more, but looking into Lewis's face, he saw the old angry look, which said more plainly than any words, 'I object to the manner of your conversation, and shall resent it presently in a manner you will not like.'

Once or twice Hurst had seen Lewis in a 'temper,' and it was not a pleasant sight; not, at least, for a good-natured fellow like Hurst, who would always rather bear offence than offend. Therefore he thought it wise to turn the conversation by making a dive at Bimboo, setting the dog up in an arm-chair, and asking his opinion of life generally. Then,

taking a table-napkin, Hurst tied it over th dog's head, and made a speech in his nam as the Lord Chamberlain, for the reformatio of all social short-comings, and the remedyin of all social evils, starting from ballets an working upward to church decorations an vestments. Lewis entered into the joke. Hi mood changed to one of uncontrolled gaiety and Irion upstairs, hearing them laughin like two schoolboys, told herself:

'After all, Gilbert Hurst has as muc influence over Claud as I have. It is only i a different direction. He has the power o making him gay, and there I fail. Claud i always disposed to be melancholy in m company. But I cannot expect to conquer o all points at once.'

And she was content with the succes which had been hers.

END OF VOL. I.

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